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"GET OUT OR I'LL THROW YOU INTO THE STREET!" AND HE ADVANCED THROUGH THE DOORWAY
WITH UPLIFTED HAND.

HOMELESS;

Or, Two Orphan Girls in New York.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE SISTERS.

The shades of night had fallen upon Gotham's great city; the supper of the poor was over,

and the dinners of the rich had been dispatched. It was in the autumn time; the leaves were falling, and already the chill night winds heralded the approach of winter's grim old king.

Up the fashionable thoroughfare, New York's pride and boast, splendid Fifth avenue, two young girls were walking.

No daughters were they of any of the millionaires whose lordly mansions lined the street; their dresses denoted that, for they were composed of neither silk nor satin, but only plain,

serviceable stuff, though made and trimmed nicely, and fitting perfectly.

But, though robed so plainly, their faces and forms would have added new charms to the finest attire that the skill of mortal could have devised.

One was a brunette; her companion a blonde: strong contrast each to the other, these two sisters, and yet it would have puzzled even the gifted eyes of an artist to have decided which was the lovelier of the twain.

The brunette, the elder, was tall and straight as a pine tree, with a glorious face, every feature as regular as the most exacting could desire, lit up by a lovely pair of black eyes, which could melt with love's tenderness or flash like the lightning with passion's fires.

The blonde in this respect was vastly different from the other, being, evidently, gentle, timid and loving.

And now, as they walked up the avenue, the elder sister's arm was passed caressingly around the other, and she whispered words of encouragement, striving to sustain the faltering spirits of the younger girl.

As we have said, the two maidens were sisters; Katherine Montcal, the elder was called, and the other, Hermia.

Who they were, and why they were wandering through New York's fashionable street, so different from all whom they encountered, the reader will see anon.

"Cheer up, dear sister," said Katherine. "It cannot be far off. The man at the depot said it was on this side of the street, and that we could not miss it when we came to it, as it was on a corner and built of white marble."

"Oh, but, Katherine dear, when I look at these elegant houses, and see the well-dressed people within, the ladies all so splendidly attired, glittering with diamonds and jewelry, and then think of how plainly we are dressed, it makes my heart sink. Surely we cannot be any kindred to these fine people. How can we two, poor girls, ask aid from such great folks?"

"Hermia, you are a little stupid, and you haven't got any more courage than a mouse!" Katherine exclaimed in the most decided manner. "Haven't you ever heard the old saying, 'fine feathers make fine birds,' and, you little goosel! don't you know that if we were dressed up like these pretty ladies, whom we see through the windows, we could hold up our heads with any of them? You could, at any rate, if I couldn't, because you are a beauty, dear, if there ever was one in this world. Every one owns that. Now, I am too dark—too much like a Gipsy—"

"Oh, Katherine, how can you say so?" the younger sister interrupted. "You are a perfect Cleopatra, so tall and stately, so far superior to me."

"In courage and impudence, I acknowledge, but I yield the palm of beauty to you. There is too much of the spit-fire about me to answer for the glorious 'Serpent of the Nile.' But, never mind our good looks; we're both of us complete beauties, dear, and here in New York I don't doubt that we can easily secure millionaires for husbands; but, while we are waiting for the millionaires to make their appearance, we have

got to live, and as I have but ten cents in my pocket, I am somewhat in doubt where our supper and lodging to-night is to come from if we don't succeed in finding Mr. Latchford's house."

A sad look came over the face of the younger girl and tears appeared in her eyes.

The other understood the meaning of this immediately.

"There, there!" she exclaimed; "don't feel sad; I suppose I'm a horrid thing to speak about husbands when I know that you are not in the market. But, you mustn't be downcast; the course of true love never did run smooth, you know; you have a fine, true-hearted lover and I wouldn't for a moment think of suggesting that everything will not come right in the end, for I think it will. Ah! if he hadn't been far away, out in the Colorado mines seeking his fortune, so as to come home and fit up a nest for you one of these days, we wouldn't be wandering like a couple of Gipsies in the streets of this great city to-night."

"My own dear Will!" murmured the other.

"Well, if you expect ever to see him again, you must keep up your courage. You are not strong, my dear little sister, you know; and you are not able to stand the hardships that wouldn't have the least effect upon me. Now, if you allow yourself to yield to despondency you will be right down sick, the first thing you know, and, gracious! I think the future looks dark and uncertain enough now, without your falling ill."

"Oh, I will try and keep up my courage, but it seems so dreadful to be turned out of our little home."

"Yes, and just as the apple crop was coming in, too, and I was relying upon the money from that to carry us over the winter; and if I hadn't trusted to it, I should have kept some money back. And only think, Hermia dear, I had just paid the bill for repairing the house and barn—two hundred dollars! Oh! how much good that two hundred dollars would do us now!"

"But, I don't understand, Katherine—how could they take our little home away from us—how could anybody be so cruel?"

"I can understand the cruelty part well enough, but where they got the law and justice for such a thing is quite beyond my comprehension. Hermia, pretty, there have been a great many business details that I haven't let you know. You haven't any head for such things, anyway, and you would only have worried yourself to death fretting about them, so I thought better to keep them to myself; but now I suppose I may as well make a clean breast of it. Of course you don't remember much about our father. You were only four years old when he died. He was an inventor—invented all sorts of things, none of which ever brought him in any money, and he had a very hard time to get along, but mother ran the farm, which had belonged to her before she was married—it was her father's—and so we all managed to live."

At last father invented something which he felt sure would make his fortune, and he went down to New York to see about it. He was so certain he was going to be successful this time, and so discouraged about his previous failure, that not even to mother would he say a single word of what his invention was like. He wrote

regularly from the city, and every letter was more and more encouraging. The fortune which he had dreamed about for years at last was in his grasp. Then came a letter saying everything had been satisfactorily arranged and that he would be home on the next Saturday. The Saturday came but no father; in his place a letter, though, saying he had been taken very sick and was unable to travel; his illness had come upon him so unexpected and was so severe that he hardly knew what to make of it; but that, if it had a fatal ending all his affairs were arranged and by applying to Mr. Jonathan Latchford his second cousin,—and he inclosed that gentleman's business card—she would learn all the particulars. Mother started instantly for New York, but arrived too late, for she found our father dead."

The voice of the girl trembled at this point, so that for a few moments she could not go on; but at last subduing her emotion, she proceeded:

"Mother went to Mr. Latchford, but that gentleman was astonished when mother told him about father's letter, and said that he really knew nothing at all about Mr. Montcal's affairs. He had come to see him about some inventions, but they were not of a kind that he could use in his factory and that was all there was to it. But, the man seemed so strangely nervous and excited that mother suspected there was something wrong about the matter, although mother was like you, dear—gentle, timid and unsuspecting. I take after father in my disposition, and like him, have a nature that knows no such word as fail. Mr. Latchford further stated he had taken a great interest in father and that if he could be of any service she might command him. Mother thanked him and came home, sad enough. A few years after, when things went badly with her through sickness, and she desired to give us girls a good education, she wrote to Mr. Latchford that she desired to raise money by mortgaging the farm, and he replied immediately that he would be glad to oblige her, and through him the matter was arranged. Mother as you know never entirely recovered from her illness, and in time she died; and her last words to me—I was then eighteen—were, never to leave the farm and never to separate from you until you were married. 'You two girls can very easily get a living off the place,' she said; 'and although everything is mortgaged, you need not let that trouble you, for you will not be disturbed whether you pay any interest or not.' I promised, of course, that I would do as she required."

"But how is it then that we have lost the farm and furniture and everything?"

"Because we were in the hands of a rascally old wretch!" cried Katherine, indignantly. "That lawyer, Mortimer Marmaduke, the old wretch! I trusted him, and signed all the papers he put before me. I consented to the foreclosure of the mortgages because he said that would straighten matters out, and I, like a fool, knowing no better, consented; but, Hermia, I have an idea the lawyer is only Mr. Latchford's agent, and that is why I have come to see him."

CHAPTER II.

POVERTY KNOCKS AT THE RICH MAN'S DOOR.

HERMIA gazed at her sister in astonishment, not unmixed with alarm.

"Why, Katherine, what on earth do you mean?"

"That I think there has been foul play in this matter, and I am determined to learn the truth. For the last three years I have had this suspicion, and I have been doing all I can to examine into the matter, and within the last few months I have learned some particulars which lead me to believe that our father's death and Mr. Latchford's rise to fortune are intimately connected. You know Mr. Latchford was only a poor man struggling along—and over head and ears in debt, too, they say—when father came to New York to seek wealth, and found death instead. There is something wrong about this matter, Hermia, and our being turned out of our farm, and driven forth, homeless into the world, savors of persecution. It looks to me as if some one had discovered that I was looking back, trying to rake up the dead past, and was determined, at any cost, to prevent me from learning the truth."

"Oh, Katherine, you are so deep and cunning compared to poor shallow me!" Hermia murmured. "I should never have dreamed of such a thing. But, who would have any object in interfering with us? We never wronged any one?"

"Only one person in all the world, and he is the guilty man who dreads discovery."

"And you think it is Mr. Latchford?"

"I do," replied the other, firmly, "although I admit I have very little evidence; but, why should father, who was the soul of honesty, write when on what he was afraid was his death-bed, that he had grasped a fortune, and that death had no terrors for him now that he was able to leave his wife and children well off? Why refer to Mr. Latchford as knowing all, and being willing to attend to everything, if it was not so?"

"And didn't he know anything about it at all?"

"He professed the most utter ignorance, and said that father must have been out of his senses to write such a thing; but the folks in the boarding-house where father stopped, and the doctor who attended him, all declared that father was in perfect possession of all his senses up to the very moment of his death, and his last words were: 'Thank Heaven, I leave my wife and children secure from want!' And he also told the doctor, on one occasion, that he had entered into an arrangement with Mr. Latchford which would make millionaires of both of them; and he further said: 'I might have kept it all to myself, but Latchford is my cousin; he's a good fellow with a large family, and has had a hard time to get along; we were boys together, and there is enough money for a dozen reasonable men in the thing, so I let him in for a share. It will take the hard work off my shoulders, and I don't grudge him the money, for I know he will make a good use of it.' Now, would father have spoken in *that* way if it had not been the truth?"

"I should think not."

"Of course, you don't remember him as I do, but father was one of the best and most self-sacrificing of men. His wife and children were his idols and for a man of his wonderful talents he was strangely modest and unassuming; he was not in the least inclined to boast, and if he said—as there isn't the least doubt he did—that he had put a fortune in his cousin's way, it was the truth, and Mr. Latchford, when he said he didn't know anything about it, told a wicked lie! One thing is sure. Mr. Latchford from being a poor man, all of a sudden got to be a rich one, just as father said he would. Now, though I really haven't anything that in a court of justice would be called evidence, yet, Hermia, don't you think I have got enough to warrant me in suspecting that we have been dreadfully wronged?"

"It does seem so; but, what do you intend to do? What can you gain by calling upon this man if he has denied that he knows anything about it?"

"I want to meet him face to face and eye to eye!" Katherine exclaimed, the color rising in her cheeks and her brilliant orbs flashing angry fires. "I want to ask him if he cannot do something for two poor orphan girls, wandering homeless through the world, his own kindred, and who haven't any other living soul to whom they can appeal. If he is a guilty man—if he wronged our mother, and is the one who has been instrumental in driving us out of our little home, I shall be able to read it in his face."

"And what then? Suppose he repulses us?" asked Hermia in her timid way, affrighted at her sister's daring.

"Then Heaven will surely come into the list and champion our cause! Does not the poet who writes as if inspired say, 'Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just!' Don't be afraid, dear; though friendless and alone, the great Providence that noteth even the fall of a sparrow will watch over us two poor orphan girls; our innocence and our helplessness will be our shield and buckler!"

"See, Katherine, see!" exclaimed Hermia, abruptly; "there is a white marble house and it is on a corner, too!"

"A palace, truly! Ah! how rich! [this man must be to afford to live in such a magnificent mansion!"]

"Surely, Katherine, you will not dare to go in there?" the younger sister asked, impressed by the splendor of the millionaire's abode.

"Indeed I will!" the other answered, resolutely. "And you must not be afraid to come with me, either."

"Oh, I will do just as you say, of course." Timid as she was the boldness of the other inspired her.

Straight then to the door of the magnificent mansion of the millionaire the two girls went.

The house was as brilliantly illuminated as though a *fete* were in progress within. Nothing abashed, however, Katherine rung the bell.

"Oh, I am so frightened!" Hermia murmured, as the peal of the hall-bell rung out shrill and clear.

"There is too much at stake for me to give way to fear even if I felt it," the other replied.

The door opened and a tall, hard-faced man dressed in a sort of livery appeared. The very moment the girls looked upon him they became sure that he was a low, miserable fellow, although he endeavored to assume a lofty and patronizing air.

"Well, what do you want?" he exclaimed.

Katherine's cheeks flushed scarlet at the coarse manner in which the man spoke, and there was an ugly glitter in her dark eyes.

This was but a servant, though, and she could not afford to waste words upon him; she had higher game in view.

"Does Mr. Latchford live here?" she asked.

"Can't you read—didn't you see the name on the door?" demanded the fellow, insolently.

Again angry words rose to the girl's lips, but by an effort she kept them back, while Hermia, frightened by the lackey's manner clung to her sister in alarm.

"Is Mr. Latchford in?"

"I don't know whether he is or not!"

"I should like to see him, if you please."

"Got an appointment with him?"

"No," replied Katherine, shortly, her temper beginning to get the better of her prudence, for the man's manner was extremely aggravating.

"Well, you have got lots of cheek, you two gals, I must say, to come a-ringing at a gentleman's door at such an hour as this, and a-wanting to see him, without having an appointment! Be off with you about your business!"

For a moment Katherine stood, dumfounded at this outrageous treatment, not knowing what on earth to make of it. She and her sister were both nicely dressed, and she knew there could not be anything suspicious about their appearance, so there was no reason for the servant speaking so roughly; and then the thought came to her that, possibly, the man had been drinking, yet she could not discover any signs of liquor about him.

The girl could not restrain herself any longer.

"How dare you speak in such a way to us, you insolent ruffian?" she cried, facing the man with flaming face and flashing eyes. "How dare you speak to ladies in such a way? I wish to see your *master*! Go instantly and tell him that Katherine and Hermia Montcal, the orphan daughters of Gilbert Montcal, desire to speak with him!"

"Oh, and you've come about that old cock-and-bull story, I s'pose, that ought to have been dead and buried ten or twelve years ago!" he cried, thus betraying a knowledge of the past that astonished the girls. "But, you won't make nothing by it. Do you think that Mr. Latchford has nothing better to do than to listen to your yarns and whining? You want money, of course! Well, you'll get none *here* and the quicker you get out the better; so, you miserable tramps, get out or I'll throw you into the street!" and he advanced through the doorway with uplifted hand, just as if he intended to strike them.

The sisters recoiled, although in the fierceness of her anger, Katherine had clinched her little fists as though she intended to give blow for blow.

Whether the fellow would have executed his threat is a question, but the timely appearance

upon the scene of a fourth party made a diversion.

"Hallo, what is the matter!" asked a gentleman, appearing behind the servant in the doorway. The new-comer was young, about the medium height, with regular features, upon which sat a grave and thoughtful expression, dark hair and eyes, and was plainly attired in a neat dark suit.

An evil look appeared upon the lackey's face as the voice reached his ears, and turning around, in an ugly way, he exclaimed:

"You better mind your own business, Mr. Secretary, you ain't got no call to interfere in this matter!"

"Haven't I? Well, I will make it my business to interfere, and if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head it will be the worse for you."

For the moment it seemed as though the fellow meditated an angry reply and then, apparently thinking better of it, he growled:

"Tain't no business of yours, and the master won't like your interfering!"

CHAPTER III.

FACE TO FACE.

THE young man now made a step forward so that the two girls could see him.

"You must permit me to be the judge of that," he answered. "What is it you require, ladies?"

He was as courteous as the other was surly.

"We wish to see Mr. Latchford," Katherine replied.

"And he don't want to see 'em, I know!" blurted out the servant. "He's got something better to do than to listen to a pack of foolish stories."

A strange expression passed rapidly across the face of the young gentleman as he listened to the man's words. The lackey had been drinking, and pretty freely too, although he had such an iron-like head that if his wits became a little muddled he rarely showed it in any other way.

"It seems to me you assume to know a great deal about this matter," the secretary remarked, quietly. "How do you know that Mr. Latchford will not want to see these ladies? They are strangers to me, and yet I fancy I am a little better acquainted with Mr. Latchford's business than you can possibly be."

"Sir, we never saw him before, and he has no reason to treat us in the outrageous manner that he has!" Katherine exclaimed, hotly.

"I tell you the master won't want to see 'em; and if you insist on bringing 'em in, you'll jist git into a hornet's nest for your pains!"

"What do you know about the matter? Mr. Latchford may wish to see them. Does he expect a visit from you?" and he addressed the question to the girls.

"No, sir, not that we know of. We did not tell any one that we were coming to see him," Katherine replied, always acting as spokesman, for Hermia did nothing but cling to her sister, and gaze timidly into the faces of the speakers.

"Do you know these ladies?" and the secretary put the question directly to the lackey.

"How should I know 'em? I never saw 'em before in my life!"

"Mr. Latchford is in, and at leisure, just having finished dinner, and I am so sure, ladies, that he will be glad to see you, that I will take the responsibility of conducting you to the reception-room, where he now is, if you will have the kindness to follow me, Miss— I beg your pardon, will you favor me with your names?"

"Monteal, sir," replied the elder sister, who already had formed a very favorable opinion of the young man. "My name is Katherine Monteal, and this is my sister, Hermia."

The lackey watched the face of the young man closely, as if he expected him, by the play of his features, to betray that the names were familiar to him; but, if such was his idea, he was doomed to disappointment, for the gentleman gave no indication that he had ever heard the names before.

"This way, if you please," he said.

"It will cost you your place, young feller," growled the servant.

"Mr. Jabez Jones, have the kindness to attend to your own business and I will look after mine!"

The millionaire was enjoying an after-dinner cigar in the luxuriantly furnished reception-room, when, with scarcely any warning, the secretary, whose name, by the way, was Salem Kerretton, conducted the girls into the apartment—the servant, whom the young man had addressed as Jabez Jones, bringing up the rear as if curious to see what reception the strangers would get.

"Two young ladies wish to see you, Mr. Latchford," said Kerretton, ushering the girls into the apartment, where the millionaire was reclining in an easy-chair, surrounded by a cloud of fragrant smoke. "I knew you were not busy, so I took the liberty of introducing them, trusting that you would excuse me. Mr. Latchford, Miss Katherine and Hermia Monteal."

Jonathan Latchford was a man of fifty—a short, thick-set, "pudgy" sort of a person, with a big head, short neck, and take him for all in all, with a most decidedly commonplace appearance.

The manner in which he received this announcement was extremely strange; his face became as red as fire—the cigar dropped from his hand; his head sunk back amid the cushions of the easy-chair, and a convulsive sort of gasp came from his throat.

Not an atom of this emotion was lost upon the secretary, yet not the slightest thing in his manner betrayed how close was the watch he was keeping.

And the servant, Jabez, perceived also how deeply the millionaire was affected, and hastened to his assistance.

"Will you have a glass of water, sir?" but Mr. Latchford, struggling to recover his composure, waved him off, and then Jabez turned savagely upon the secretary:

"There, didn't I tell you so, Mr. busy-body? I couldn't help it, sir," and he again addressed his master. "I did the best I could to keep them out, but this here chap would fetch them in, spite of me, though I told him I knew you wouldn't like it!"

"The young ladies were so anxious to see you that I took the liberty of introducing them, knowing how accessible you are generally to all comers," observed Kerreton, in his cool, quiet way—so soft, so careless, and yet as straight to the point as the hammer to the anvil.

The millionaire looked in a helpless sort of way, first at Kerreton and then at the lackey, and a close observer would have immediately suspected that in a measure both men had some hold upon him.

"Yes, yes," he murmured in a rather bewildered manner, "it is all right, of course. I am always glad to see everybody that comes upon business, but it was so unexpected, so—I don't know as I can explain it exactly, but for the moment I was overcome by surprise."

"They wouldn't have come in if I had had my way!" muttered the servant with a savage look at Kerreton, which that gentleman received in the most placid manner.

"It is all right—the surprise and—have the goodness to retire, please, as I presume the ladies would prefer to state their business in private."

The secretary bowed and quitted the apartment, followed by the lackey, grumbling to himself under his breath, but when the pair were out of the room, and the door was closed behind them, Jones's wrath found vent in words:

"Now, you have upset a pretty kettle of fish, blame you!" he cried, shaking his clinched fist in the face of the other. "I don't know what has got into the old man to stand it so mealy-mouthed. I expected him to order me to kick you out of the house."

"And no doubt you would have been glad to perform that operation," Kerreton remarked, laughing.

"I would have done it as quick as eat my dinner!"

"If you were able."

"Able!" and Jones fairly gasped at the impudence of the other.

"Yes; and I don't think you are."

"Why, I am big enough to put you over my knee and break you in two!" blurted Jabez.

As an answer, the secretary, with a strength that few would imagine dwelt within his frame, took the other by the throat with an iron gripe and shook him until his teeth fairly chattered and his knees knocked together.

"You miserable hound!" he exclaimed. "I could find it in my heart to shake the life out of your vile carcass, only I know that I would be cheating the hangman!"

Then he released his hold, and Jones, whose bravado had been suddenly and completely taken out of him, fell to the floor in a heap.

"The next time have a care how you talk to me," and with a parting kick, so vigorously bestowed that it made the lackey howl with pain, the secretary walked away, leaving the astonished servant to nurse his injuries and relieve his mind by swearing all sorts of horrible vengeance upon the man whom, for the first time, he now knew to be his master.

After the door closed behind the two men, Latchford spoke to the two girls:

"Take a seat," and he motioned them to

chairs. "I am not very well, and my physician ordered me to be particular whom I received, so as not to get unduly excited by strangers, and that is the reason why my servant was so obstinate about admitting you."

Now, Katherine felt sure there was not a word of truth in this statement. Her quick instincts warned her that she and her sister were the only visitors whom the millionaire did not wish to see; and he being, in some mysterious way, informed of their visit, had given orders to refuse them admittance, for now she was convinced the lackey had recognized them at once, and that was the reason why he had treated them so rudely.

"My memory is not so good as it once was; I am getting old, you see; but your name is quite familiar to me; I think I knew your—your mother."

"And our father also, sir—Gilbert Monteal. He died here in New York some twelve years ago."

"Ah, yes, I think I remember," and again the millionaire breathed very hard, and his face showed signs of suppressed excitement.

"Both of our parents are dead, sir; we are two orphan girls, all alone in the world, and we have come to you for advice."

"Advice—yes, advice; well, that doesn't cost anything, and generally you can get plenty of that for the asking," he remarked, with a feeble attempt to appear merry.

"We had a little farm which gave us a modest support, but by a mean, treacherous trick we have been robbed of everything—driven homeless out into the world—and now we come to you to know—*what has become of our father's property?*"

CHAPTER IV.

WAR IS DECLARED.

AGAIN the head of the old man sunk back in his chair, and he breathed with difficulty.

"You see, as I told you, I am not very well," he murmured after quite a long pause, "and the slightest bit of excitement upsets me. But you were speaking of your father's property—I did not know that he had any."

"And I am *sure* he had—a magnificent property," replied Katherine, firmly; "for he said so upon his death-bed, and he was too good and honest a man to go into the other world with a lie upon his lips."

"Yes, I remember; your mother had an idea of this kind, but I believe she did not succeed in discovering anything."

"Because the rogues who stole my father's property, and thus robbed the widow and the orphans of their rights, were so cunning that they concealed all traces of their crime, and my poor, dear mother was of such an easy, gentle nature that she was not fitted to play the part of a sleuth-hound and hunt down the perpetrators of this ignoble crime; but I, sir, am composed of different stuff. For the last few years I have devoted all my spare moments to the unraveling of this dark and horrid mystery. In some way, I am convinced, the villain, or villains, who stole the fortune which my father left, became possessed of the intelligence that I was busy on their track, seeking a clew. Alarm

was at once taken, and this crafty, cunning robber, for I think there is only one, feared a poor, weak, helpless girl, and so he set to work to drive my sister and myself forth, homeless, into the world. The lawyer, Mortimer Marmaduke, was the tool chosen to accomplish the crime. Little by little the net was wound around us, and we totally unsuspecting all the while. Two mortgages were in existence. In my ignorance of the law I allowed both to be foreclosed, not knowing that by so doing I was placing myself entirely in the power of my enemy, so that, at a moment's warning, myself and sister could be turned out of our home and stripped of almost everything we possessed. And the moment we were fairly in the toils the trap was sprung. Never were there two poor girls taken more completely at a disadvantage. Satisfied, then, that Marmaduke, whom I had so completely trusted, was nothing but an ardent rogue, I sought other counsel, but was told that it was too late, and that I had no redress. Then I determined to come to New York and see you!"

Latchford had listened impatiently to this recital, and all the time it seemed as if he was nerving himself for some great effort.

"What do you come to me for?" he asked, querulously. "I helped your mother some years ago, but that is no reason why I should be relied upon to come to the rescue of the whole family every time you get into any difficulty."

"I come to you because I believe you are the man who has turned my sister and myself out into the world!" the girl replied, boldly.

An ugly look passed over the fat face of the millionaire, and he clinched his hands nervously together.

"Take care—take care what you are saying, young lady!" he exclaimed, attempting to assume a defiant manner. "What have I to do with your affairs? It is true that, some years ago, out of pity for your mother's distresses, I recommended Mr. Marmaduke to lend her money, taking the farm and personal property as security, but beyond that I haven't had anything to do with the matter."

"What did this vile wretch of a lawyer mean, then, when he said that if I would marry him, he would take measures to stop the persecution of us two girls; and more—that he would advance money to aid me in whatever enterprise I had in view, and which was so distasteful to a certain party in New York? Concealing the rage and horror into which this offer threw me, I asked him if he was only an agent, and if the man in New York, whose track I was upon, was the principal? He admitted it was so, thinking I was going to become his willing victim, and he further said that, aided by his money, I would have no difficulty in bringing my game to terms, and then we would be rich! He also said that in his opinion, all the legal proceedings were part of a cunningly-devised plan to get me into the power of the man who feared the evil record of his past life would be brought to light, and he tried to get me to explain to him what the trouble was, and asked me why a New York millionaire should be willing to spend his money like water to crush two

poor young girls and drive them forth helpless. At last, in bitter scorn, I drove him from my presence, and now I come to you. Why do you persecute us, two creatures who have never wronged a human being? Is it because you robbed us years ago of the fortune our father left?"

"Young lady I cannot longer listen to these insults!" Latchford exclaimed, rising and attempting to assume a virtuous indignation. "I have listened to you calmly and patiently. I would have been inclined to offer you assistance, but this outrageous calumny puts to flight all ideas of that sort. Once for all, I tell you I know nothing about any fortune left by your father, and it is absurd that so much importance should be attached to the insane delusions of a delirious, dying man. I have, in the past, assisted your family, as by the tie of relationship which exists, I am, as a man, bound to do; but that is ended now. This ridiculous insult makes us strangers henceforth. Oblige me by leaving my house!"

"You will have war then?" Katherine cried, rising like a young Juno, and as proud and daring as though she had the wealth of a nation at her back.

"You are crazy, young woman, and I must really, in justice to my own self-respect, decline to have any further conversation with you!"

"Be it so! To Heaven I commit my cause and the Great Judge who rules above will surely see that in time, despite your wealth and influence, justice will be done the orphan girls!"

Then, taking Hermia's trembling hand in hers, she left the apartment. The younger sister had been terror-stricken at the boldness of Katherine in bearding the money king in his own house and home.

"He is a guilty man," Katherine whispered to Hermia as they passed through the hall; "he did not dare to look me in the face during all the time we were speaking; never once did his eyes meet mine. I am satisfied now that my suspicion is true. This man's fortune has come from our father's brain; this lordly mansion, this elegant furniture, all this luxury by right belongs to us!"

"Oh, but, Katherine, just think! What chance do we stand, we two poor girls, without even a single friend to aid us, against this man with all his money? I am not as bright and smart as you, yet even to my ignorance it is plain we cannot hope to win in a struggle against this man of wealth without Heaven works a miracle in our favor."

"Then the miracle will come!" the other replied, in the most decided tones. "It is not possible that a just Providence will permit the orphan and the friendless to be overcome by the mere weight of money. Gloomy as is the prospect before us now, forget not that every cloud has a silver lining, and that it is always the darkest hour before the dawn."

The secretary was in waiting at the portal to let them out.

He glanced carefully around, to be certain that no one was near, and then spoke rapidly:

"Did you have a stormy interview?"

Now, although there was no particular reason why Katherine should trust this strange young

gentleman, excepting that he had interfered to secure her admission to the presence of Mr. Latchford, something about him irresistibly attracted her, so she answered frankly:

"Yes, sir, our interview was more stormy than pleasant."

"You came on a certain quest—to demand a certain thing: what said he?"

The girls were amazed at the knowledge he displayed, and while Katherine was hesitating how to frame her answer, he, misunderstanding the cause of her hesitation, said:

"I beg your pardon for putting such a question, but I assure you it comes not from any officious spirit. I think I can be of service to you if I know all the facts in the case."

"Although you are a stranger, I feel sure, sir, that you are a friend and not an enemy," the elder sister replied, while the young one sweetly smiled, for both trusted this new acquaintance.

"He refused, of course?"

"Yes, denied all knowledge, and said it was but the insane delusion of a dying man."

"Your father was in perfect possession of all his senses, for I was at his bedside when he died!"

"Oh, sir, is that possible?" Katherine exclaimed, tears standing in the eyes of both the sisters as they gazed upon the handsome face of the secretary, who was brought so near them, seemingly by this declaration.

"It is the truth, but the fact is not known to any one, and I have good reason for asking you never to reveal it. I tell it to you, so that you may trust me. I think I can serve you, and I will, most surely, if there is an opportunity, for the love I once bore your father, who was a friend to me at a time when I needed friends very badly indeed."

The elder sister turned a beaming glance upon the younger one as much as to say, "Did I not tell you Heaven would aid us?"

"It was by chance that I happened to notice you when you were at the door, and then I was determined that you should have speech with Mr. Latchford. I thought when he saw you his heart might be touched, and he might be impelled to do you justice. He, at heart, is not so bad, but when a man once enters upon the downward path, it is terribly hard to either stop or retrace his footsteps. He refused and defied you, then?"

"Yes."

"Then the struggle must begin at once. Are you well provided with money? Do not be offended at the question, for you must rank me as an ally in the future, and if your own purse is not well-supplied you must allow me to act as your banker, for the present; then, when the fight is won and you are in possession of the wealth that is rightfully yours you can easily pay me back again."

Both of the girls' faces were covered with blushes at this generous offer, tendered in such a respectful manner.

It seemed like a gift straight from Heaven though, for the orphans were not only without acquaintances in the city but they were almost penniless.

"Indeed, sir," said Katherine at last, "we

haven't any money to speak of, and I didn't really know where we should go to-night."

"Here are ten dollars," and Kerretton drew a bill from his pocket book and gave it to Katherine. "That will suffice for the present. You came in at the Grand Central depot?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you can find your way back there, without any trouble?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Well, go to any of the hotels opposite the depot, the large one on the corner is perhaps the best. Tell the clerk that you have come to the city on business for a few days and wish a room. He will take good care of you and see that you are made comfortable. In the morning I will have the pleasure of waiting upon you, and then we can talk matters over at our leisure. Don't hesitate to take and use the money, for it is only a loan for a short time, remember," he added, perceiving that the girl hesitated.

For once Hermia was the first to speak:

"Oh, we will take it, sir; and very much obliged indeed we are."

Slowly Katherine put the bill in her little wallet, a bright blush upon her cheeks and an odd look in her brilliant eyes. She was strangely silent now—this usually talkative girl.

Kerretton held open the door and the two passed through.

"Good-night," he said.

"Good-night," they replied, and once again the two orphans were on the avenue.

"You were right, Katherine, when you said that Heaven would watch over us!" Hermia exclaimed.

CHAPTER V.

A DARK SCHEME.

HARDLY had the door closed behind the two girls when the old man sunk into his easy-chair again and drawing forth his handkerchief wiped away the perspiration which stood in great drops upon his forehead.

"The bold baggage!" he cried; "the forward, impudent hussy! and she means it, too—every word of it! If she had the money to back her indomitable courage what wouldn't she accomplish? But, she hasn't the money, and I have, and I will spend every cent of it, too, before she shall know the truth. But I fear—I fear her!"

"I don't doubt it, dad!" said a shrill voice, and the millionaire, turning in his chair, beheld a young man who had entered unperceived.

The resemblance between the two was so marked that any observer would have taken them at once for father and son.

The young man, though, was not as good-looking as his sire, although old Latchford could lay but little claim to any manly beauty. He had a dull, stolid look, and no one would have suspected from his appearance that he had an overstock of brains; while the son, on the contrary, was possessed of a sharp, cunning expression, and a close observer would have set him down for a keen, unscrupulous rascal.

He was short in stature, but thin in flesh, instead of being stout like the father, had red hair, a freckled face, and, altogether, was ex-

tremely unprepossessing, although dressed in the "loudest" manner.

"Hello, where did you come from?" growled the old man, annoyed.

"Next room," responded the hopeful who answered to the name of Abner. "I happened to be in there; the door was ajar, and so I had the pleasure of overhearing all the conversation between you and that delightfully fresh young lady, who really ought to be put on ice for fear she will spoil." Then he helped himself to a chair, where he sat and grinned at his sire in a peculiarly exasperating way.

"You had better mind your own business; you are always interfering where you are not wanted."

"Yes, but, respected dad, it strikes me forcibly this is my business. This young lady is a relative of mine isn't she? A very charming girl, indeed—quite my style. The little one is a pretty thing, but she hasn't got the fire and the passion of the elder sister. Oh, I tell you, father, she is a hummer! In the language of the classics, she is a jay-bird and too utterly too too, for anything!"

"Bah! what do you want of her, a beggar?"

"Yes, dad; but who made her a beggar, eh? There's a conundrum for you to try your aged jaws upon. If you find it too much for you, give it up, and I'll tip you another." And this hopeful young man leaned back in his chair and winked in a knowing sort-of-way at his parent.

"What do you mean by that insinuation?" demanded Latchford, getting red in the face.

"Oh, you know well enough; why do you want to try and play innocent? Maybe you think I ain't up to snuff, but I am, and I guess I know a heap-sight more than you think I do."

"What do you know?"

"I was in the library the other day when that lawyer from the country, Mortimer Marmaduke, was here."

The old man started in surprise and the son chuckled.

"That rather astonishes your weak nerves doesn't it? You didn't think I was in the closet when you walked into the room."

"Ah, you were there, then, on purpose to play the spy upon me!" cried the old man, with passion.

"Nothing of the sort; it was pure accident. I was hunting after an old book which had been stuck away in the closet, the door swung to after me, and just as I was about to open it you and the lawyer entered the room, and it suddenly occurred to me, when I heard you say upon entering, that the library was perfectly private, and there wasn't any danger of being interrupted or overheard, it might not be a bad thing for me if I heard the conversation, so I let the door remain closed, sat down on a pile of books and listened."

"Overheard every word, then, I suppose?"

"Right you are, governor—every blessed word, and to prove it I'll repeat the substance of the conversation. You said to Marmaduke, now that everything was fixed so that the two orphan girls could be driven out at a few days' notice, you wanted the machinery of the law put in motion, but *you* did not want to be in

any way associated with the transaction. He was a wily old duck and tried in a sly way to find out *why* you were so desirous of driving the girls out homeless into the world, and you were idiot enough to give him an inkling of what was up, by saying that, after they were driven forth as beggars, it was possible they would give up their insane notion of trying to measure strength with you. This at once gave him a clew, and the old rascal, according to the girl, tried to double on you and secure one of the girls for himself, thinking no doubt he could make a stake out of the job. There's the whole thing in a nutshell. The girl was right in her suspicions. You *were* the man who advanced the money on the mortgages; you *were* the man who took advantage of the moment when you knew they could not possibly meet your demands to turn them out. But you were stupid in so doing; the girl was puttering in her feeble way, at this secret in your life, and if you had left her alone, the chances are she would have married some country jockey, and then, with the cares of a family on her mind, would never have thought of troubling you; but now you have forced her into the war, and I'll bet big odds that unless a certain party I know of takes a hand in the game she will worry you, heavy!"

"Ah, do you think so?" and Latchford looked his annoyance and apprehension.

"I feel sure of it; and do you know, dad, I've often wondered what that private detective used to come to see you about. I thought, maybe, there was something wrong down to the factory, but now I understand; he was playing the spy upon the girl. Dad, I'm the only man who can get you out of this hobble!"

"You?"

"Yes, sir; I'm the boy!"

"I don't exactly understand what *you* can do."

"Of course you don't; and you won't until I tell you. But I say, dad, since I've been let into this little thing I know a heap more than I did."

"The older we grow the wiser we are," observed the father, dryly.

"The airs that Jabez Jones has put on in this house has often astonished me; he's only a servant, but he acts once in awhile as if the house couldn't get on without him, particularly when he gets a little rum on board. I s'pose he knows *something*, don't he, father? and he could make it ugly for you if he chose to talk?"

"Jabez is a faithful servant, and he will never do aught to injure me."

"Perhaps not; and then that other fellow, this secretary, this business manager, for that is what he really is; why, he seems to know a great deal more about your business than you do yourself."

"He is as useful to me as my right hand, and I don't know what I should do without him."

"And has he got a hold on you?" asked Abner.

"No, no; why should you think so?" demanded the old man, with a new alarm.

"Only that he acts in a cool, quiet way, and

don't seem to care two pins whether school keeps or not."

"He knows his value, that is all; the business has been built up under his eye, and he is so skillful in all the details that he could build up an opposition business to-morrow if he knew certain things."

"Yes, yes; I understand; but he has nothing then, to do with this girl affair?"

"Oh, no; not in the least."

"But he introduced them in spite of Jones!"

"The reason for that is plain enough; he saw that Jabez had been drinking, and as he talked roughly to the girls, as a gentleman, he interfered. How could he know they were the last persons in the world I wished to see?"

"But Jabez did, and he was on the look-out for them. I suppose that telegram this morning warned you they had started for New York. Marmaduke mired you, eh?"

The old man grunted; and the son, who saw he had hit upon the truth, laughed.

"Now, dad, to business; I can put a stop to this thing if you are inclined to come down handsomely."

"How? Explain."

"By getting the girls out of the way," and the son leaned forward in his chair and fairly hissed the words.

"Out of the way?" and Latchford's face wore a troubled expression.

"Yes; don't be alarmed; I don't mean anything desperate. I don't propose to run my head into a hangman's noose. What I mean is, to fix them so they won't trouble you any more."

"Ah, Abner, if they troubled me they would trouble you fully as much."

"You don't mean to say that if they succeeded they would sweep everything away?"

"Pretty much so."

"Well, it is time that I took hold of the matter then. Dad, I've taken a fancy to that spitfire. I think she is just the kind of a girl to suit me, and I've got a friend who will be glad to take the little one. It will cost some money, you know, for we will have to carry the girls off, and that sort of thing takes cash; but, if the plan succeeds, neither one of the two orphans will be apt to make mischief again. Can I have a thousand to commence on? Perhaps that will be all I shall want."

"Yes; but make a sure thing of it."

"You may bet on me! I'll go for 'em at once. I'll put a sharp little lad on their track, so I shall be able to trace them without difficulty. Ta ta, governor. Inside of twenty-four hours you may expect news." Then Abner sauntered out.

CHAPTER VI.

LURED AWAY.

LIGHT were the hearts of the two girls as they retraced their steps down the avenue.

"There, what did I tell you?" Katherine exclaimed. "'It is a long lane that has no turning,' is what the old proverb says, and it is a very true saying, too. Just think how unlucky we have been for a long time, and when we approached the house of that miserable old wretch to-night, wouldn't it have troubled us to call to mind the name of a single friend able and willing to help us in this, our hour of need?"

"Indeed it would; and that gentleman seems to be so nice, too. If it had not been for him we would never have been admitted."

"It was all arranged beforehand, I am satisfied of it. Why should that great brute behave so insolently to us? We were perfect strangers to him, and he had no reason to suppose we were not ladies, if we wasn't dressed up in silks and satins. No one ever spoke to us in such a way before, and there wasn't anything in our appearance to warrant such ill-treatment, I am sure. No, Hermia, it wasn't our looks, but this old scoundrel, who has robbed us of our heritage, was warned, in some way, that we were coming to see him, and he had that ugly brute on the watch for the express purpose of frightening us away. He feared—the miserable rascal—to meet the two poor orphans whom he had robbed. Didn't I tell you, sister, that if I once came face to face with him I could tell you whether he had wronged us or not? I knew I could read in his face whether he was innocent or guilty, and he is guilty, dear; I am as sure of it as if I had all the proofs of his guilt right here in my hand."

"But, Katherine, it seems almost beyond belief that we two poor things can do anything against this man. Just think of the money he can afford to spend, while we have nothing."

"Oh, yes, we have! We have right and justice on our side," replied the other, stoutly. "Hasn't almost a miracle happened already? Here we were, all alone in this great wilderness of a city with but ten cents in our pockets, no place to sleep, and although I didn't say anything to you about it, I had made up my mind that we should have to lodge to-night on a bench in some of the public parks—that is, if the police would allow us to do so, and I was rather doubtful on that point, when up springs this generous young man, just like one of the good fairies we used to read about, when we were children, in the story books; he gives us ten dollars, and promises to come and look after us to-morrow. Now, if we don't believe after this that Heaven is watching over us, then we ought to be burnt at the stake for a pair of infidels."

Hermia smiled; the good spirits of Katherine were contagious, and there was no disputing the fact that fortune seemed to be looking with a kindly eye upon the wild and desperate adventure of the two orphans, who had come, friendless, to the great city to fight a battle with a man worth a million.

As Katherine had believed, they had no difficulty in finding their way back to the neighborhood of the depot, or in discovering the hotel indicated by the secretary.

"We had better go and get our traveling-bags from the baggage-room," Katherine suggested, "for it won't look right for us to go to a hotel without any baggage. I haven't traveled much, but I have read enough about it, and I know it will cause remark if we go empty-handed."

Hermia coincided with her elder sister in this, as she generally did in everything, so the girls got their bags and then crossed the street to the hotel.

They were received with all possible politeness, for there was that air of good-breeding

about them which convinced the experienced hotel clerk that they were ladies.

A room was assigned to them, which Katherine paid for in advance, although the clerk told them, jocosely, there was no need of that, as he was not at all afraid of their running away.

"You see, dear," Katherine said, after they were snug in their room, "the big city is not such a bad place, after all. I'm sure we have no reason to complain, for we have met friends at almost every turn. The only ones who have treated us harshly are the vile old wretch, whom we have come to strip of his ill-gotten gains, and his servant, who, of course, was set on by his master to frighten us."

To the young, the future generally seems bright, but if the two girls could have looked forward a few hours, they would have discovered that the city held creatures ready to destroy and devour upon the first opportunity.

The two orphans, totally unsuspecting, had never for an instant dreamed of being followed, but they had been, and an easy task it was for the spy, for neither one of the two had ever taken the trouble to look behind, and no sooner did the watcher see them safely located in the hotel, than off he set to warn the master who had employed him.

And that master, as the reader doubtless suspects, was no other than Abner Latchford.

The whereabouts of the girls ascertained, he immediately set to work upon a plan which only a man with the spice of a fiend in his nature would ever have concocted.

It was early in the evening when the girls reached the hotel, and although from their country life they were used to retiring to rest early, yet when the hour of nine arrived, their usual time for going to bed, neither one of the two felt at all sleepy. The excitement through which they had passed, since leaving their quiet country home, tended to make them wakeful.

And so they sat and talked, speculating vaguely, upon the manner in which Jonathan Latchford had robbed their father, and for the first time, Katherine explained to Hermia how it was that her suspicions chanced to be aroused that her father's dying words were true, and that Latchford had risen to wealth by using another man's property.

At the post-office one day, in the little village where the two girls lived, which also was the general store of the neighborhood, Katherine, while waiting to be served, picked up a trade journal which happened to be lying upon the counter. She was an inveterate reader, and nothing in the newspaper line came amiss to her, so noticing the paper she glanced at it. The old store-keeper told her to "take it along" as he reckoned it didn't belong to anybody, having "been kicking around for a long time."

With never a suspicion of how important was the "find," she carried the newspaper home and when she examined it, found among other matters that it gave a portrait and a full description of the career—eulogistic in the highest degree—of the "successful man of business, Jonathan Latchford." The writer related how that gentleman had struggled along in his early business life, told about the adverse fortune

which came near swamping him, until, by a series of lucky hits, "some ten or twelve years ago," he lifted himself from the verge of bankruptcy to the firm foundation of financial success. And now it was estimated that the "plant" of his factory—she didn't understand exactly what this meant, but supposed it was a short way of saying the "whole business"—with its trade secrets was worth four or five hundred thousand dollars.

The girl read and pondered. Ten or twelve years ago! That was just about the time of her father's death. Latchford was a poor man then, but suddenly blossomed out into a rich one; was not his prosperity due to what he had received from his cousin, her father? The more she pondered the matter, the more she became convinced that she and her sister had been cruelly wronged and in her heart grew up a wild desire for justice.

Without stopping to calculate how it was possible for one situated as she to do battle with so powerful a man as the millionaire, the brave girl resolved to devote the rest of her life to ascertaining the truth.

She began a series of cautious inquiries and it soon came to Latchford's knowledge that the young woman was attempting to rake up the past, and, in order to stop her, he began to use the power which his wealth gave him, and with what results the reader has seen.

About half-past nine one of the bell-boys of the hotel came to the door of the girls' room and announced that a gentleman in the parlor desired to speak with them.

The orphans thought at once that it must be the secretary, for there was nobody else in the city who knew anything about them.

"He said he would come in the morning, but perhaps he thought it would be better to come to-night, so as to be sure that we are all safe," Katherine remarked, a slight blush upon her fair face and a joyous light gleaming in her glorious eyes.

Hermia had never seen her sister so much interested in a gentleman before, and so remarked, at which Katherine cried, "Nonsense!" and then the two descended to the parlor.

But, the gentleman who waited there was not the secretary. On the contrary, a stranger, an elderly gentleman, with a grave face, and snow-white hair and beard. He was neatly attired in a dark business suit, wore an old-fashioned stand-up collar and a white cravat.

He was just such a man as eight persons out of ten, meeting upon the street, would have set down for a minister, and the ninth one would have taken him for a deacon at the least, while the tenth might have had suspicions.

He arose and bowed in the politest manner when the girls entered the room, hesitating, upon perceiving that it was tenanted by a stranger.

"Miss Katherine Monteal and Miss Hermia Monteal, I presume?" he said, with an elaborate bow to each girl as he called her by name.

"Yes, sir," Katherine replied.

"Allow me to have the honor of introducing myself. My name is Cadamus, John Cadamus, and I have come upon a rather peculiar mission,

I have the honor to represent your relative, Mr. Jonathan Latchford."

The girls were so taken by surprise by this announcement that they knew not what to say.

"I perceive that you are amazed," he continued, "and I can readily imagine that to receive a message from him after the unpleasant interview which you had with him to-night, was about the last thing in your thoughts. I have the honor to be Mr. Latchford's confidential man of business, and I can assure you that gentleman keeps few secrets from me. Pray be seated while I explain matters." And then he placed chairs for the girls.

Bewildered by the surprise of the unexpected event the orphans sat down and waited for the explanation.

"You happened by ill-luck to call upon Mr. Latchford at a very inopportune time this evening," the old gentleman remarked. "He has been greatly worried by business details all day long, and was in a bad humor to night—in just the mood, my dear young ladies, to be gruff and crusty to almost any one. But, after you departed, he thought the matter over; he explained everything to me and did me the honor to ask my advice in the premises. At once, my dear young ladies, I perceived where the trouble lay. A certain party has been poisoning the mind of Mr. Latchford against you for quite a long time, and when I discovered this, the idea at once occurred to me that it was more than possible that that same party—I will throw aside all disguise, and say that I refer to the lawyer, Mortimer Marmaduke—that he, I repeat, was doing his best, in a covert, underhand-way, of course, (such men never do anything openly), to influence you against Mr. Latchford—to make you believe, in fact, that Mr. Latchford was willing and eager to get a chance to injure you. The idea of it! To injure you two poor girls and his own blood relations, too! It is absurd!"

The listeners did not know what to make of this, and even the clear-headed, quick-witted Katherine was puzzled.

"But never mind Mr. Marmaduke; his malice has done all the mischief that is possible now. He will not make any more trouble. And, the long and short of the matter is, young ladies, to come to the end at once, I am here commissioned by Mr. Latchford to ask you to return to his house and have a talk with him over this tangled matter. The light I have managed to let in upon the subject makes it look very different now, to him. He is your nearest living relative, and, as Providence has been pleased to take away all of his once large family, with the exception of his eldest son, he thinks it is only right he should be on amicable terms with you two girls."

"We will go, of course," Katherine said, although there was a misgiving in her mind that, despite all these flattering words, Mr. Latchford was not the man to do her justice.

"The carriage is at the door, if you will have the kindness to put on your things and descend, and you may rest assured that everything will be made satisfactory."

Confused and puzzled, the girls complied with

the request, and in a few minutes more entered a coach drawn up before the door of the hotel.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT BEFELL THEM.

THERE was a young man sitting within the coach.

"My son, Thomas," said the old gentleman, as he opened the door and assisted the young ladies to enter, then got in himself, closed the door, and away the vehicle went.

"If one of you ladies do not mind riding backward, I shall be much obliged if you would take the front seat, for it always makes me deathly sick to sit with my back to the horses," he had said, as he assisted the girls into the coach.

Katherine was superior to this weakness and volunteered to sit in the front, so that she and the young man sat together, while Hermia and the old gentleman occupied the rear seat.

He commenced to talk briskly the moment the coach started.

"Whodid you get, my son? This is not our regular man, is it?"

"No, sir; this is a stranger; our man was gone."

The girls looked earnestly at each other; the tones of the young man's voice seemed not unfamiliar, and yet they could not recall that they had ever met him before, although the face, like the voice, appeared familiar.

"You told him where we wished to go?"

"Oh, yes; he says he knows the house, well enough."

"It would really be a wonder if he didn't, for almost everybody in the city knows the Latchford 'palace,' as it is called. How did you like the looks of the mansion?"

The question was addressed to Katherine, but her mind was so full of thoughts that she did not feel in any mood for conversation, and therefore all of Mr. Cadamus's endeavors to draw her out were fruitless.

"Hallo, where on earth is the fellow going to?" Mr. Cadamus cried, abruptly, as the vehicle swung around a corner into quite a dark street.

"Why this is wrong—this isn't the way!" exclaimed the young man.

"Are you sure he understood you when you gave him the directions?"

"Oh, yes, and he said he knew the house."

"Is he sober?"

"He seems to be."

"Speak to him."

The young man rapped on the glass window in the front of the coach, and after considerable trouble succeeded in making the driver comprehend that he wanted to speak to him, so that individual pulled his horses up to a slower pace and yelled out:

"What is it?"

"You are going wrong—this isn't the way! We want to go to Mr. Latchford's house, on Fifth avenue."

"All right! I know it—know it like a book, and I will take you there."

"But you are not going right—you are taking us out of the way."

"Only 'round the block; that's all. I don't

want to take your money without giving the worth of it, and I thought, maybe, you'd like a little turn in the park."

"Oh, the fellow is drunk; there is no mistake about it! The impudence of the idea!" the old man cried. "My son, tell him to drive to Mr. Latchford's house on Fifth avenue immediately. We want to go there and nowhere else, and the quicker we get there the better!"

The young man repeated these instructions to the driver, who simply sung out, "All right!" and wheeled his horses around.

"Of all cool impudence this caps the climax. Take us for a drive in the park! Well, well!" Mr. Cadamus observed.

"I believe the fellow is under the influence of liquor," the young man remarked.

"Goodness gracious! I hope not!" the old gentleman exclaimed. "This comes of taking a strange coachman. The man whom we always employ, when we don't use our own horses, is as steady as a clock. I hope he won't upset us. It seems to me that he is driving very carelessly. I declare it has given me quite a shock. My boy, have you got my medicine in your pocket? I really feel quite faint."

"Yes, sir, I have it."

"Put a few drops on the sponge, please, so that I can inhale it. Upon my word I am positively upset."

The young man drew a vial from his pocket and a small sponge, uncorked the vial and poured some of the fluid in it upon the sponge, a strange sickening odor filling the coach the moment the vial was opened.

And, while this was being done, the old gentleman kept up a constant succession of complaints, declaring that his head was swimming around, so that he felt exactly as if he was dying.

When the sponge was saturated with the pungent fluid the young man passed it over to the old gentleman.

"Here, father!" he said; and the driver, who, from his seat upon the box, had been stealthily watching through the window in the front of the coach all that was taking place within, the moment he saw the sponge passed from the one to the other whipped up his horses so that they sprung ahead with a sudden jerk that seemed almost violent enough to tear the coach in pieces.

Those within had all that they could do to keep their places; a cry of alarm came simultaneously from the lips of the girls, and the men, as if in order to reassure them, passed their arms around their waists, and while holding them in an iron grip, helpless, almost suffocated by the violent pressure, the old man pressed the sponge to the nostrils of Hermia while the young man did the same with the vial to Katherine.

Too late the orphan girls realized that they had been ensnared! Vainly they struggled! They were helpless in the power of their cruel enemies, and though they fought with all their might to resist the subtle influence of the drug, yet they could not, and soon sunk into insensibility.

When the two ceased to struggle, and sunk back helpless against the side of the coach, the

young man tapped upon the front window—a signal, evidently, to warn the driver that the deed was done, and that he might relax the speed of his steeds, which had been hurried onward so that the noise of the wheels would drown any cries that might come from the girls.

"Did you ever see a nicer job worked?" exclaimed the younger man with a fiendish smile as he surveyed the hapless maidens.

"Never! It worked like a charm."

"Well, that is the way to do it; the more carefully a job is planned the easier it always is to carry it out. You see we have managed the matter so scientifically that these two will disappear as completely and leave as little trace behind them as though they had been swallowed up by the earth."

"Yes, but who will have any interest in trying to trace them?"

"Not a soul on earth; they are friendless and alone, and as much in our power as if we had them on a desert island a thousand miles from the main land!"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE TOILS.

THE trap had been sprung and the prey secured; and as the two orphans were separated by their captors, we will follow the fortune of the younger girl first.

When Hermia recovered her senses she found herself lying upon a bed, surrounded by utter darkness. For a few moments after she became conscious, she felt so weak and confused that she could only lie still, gaze around her and wonder what it all meant.

Then, as she became stronger, little by little she realized what had occurred. She sat up and called for Katherine, but there was no answer to her plaintive appeal.

The darkness and silence appalled her, and, trembling with alarm, she rose from the bed and groped her way around the room.

It was a small apartment, with a window at one end and a door at the other, but both were fastened securely and defied her utmost power.

Satisfied at last that she was a helpless prisoner, she groped her way back to the bed, and threw herself upon it, bursting into a flood of tears, and as she sobbed as if her heart would break, slumber gradually stole upon her, for she was wearied with the toils of the day and the great excitement through which she had passed, so finally she slept soundly, and did not awake until the morning sun shone brightly in through the window.

With a start of alarm she sat up and looked around her—for the moment bewildered by the strangeness of the situation.

She was in an attic room of a miserable old house, and when she arose and went to the window the dreary outlook showed her that she had been removed from the city to the country, and a wilder and more desolate view she had never looked upon.

The apartment was furnished in the scantiest manner—nothing but the bed, a small table and a rickety chair; no carpet upon the floor, and no curtain to the window.

After she had completed her survey of the

surroundings, Hermia sat down upon the edge of the bed and tried to guess at the meaning of this strange affair. Lacking the pluck and energy of her sister she felt utterly helpless; and while wondering what was to become of her, the door was unlocked and a tall, muscular-looking woman entered the room. She was plainly dressed and had such a peculiar look about her that Hermia's heart sunk immediately upon her appearance.

"Hallo, you are awake, eh?" exclaimed the woman, perceiving the girl was sitting up.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, how do you like your quarters here? Do you think you will be comfortable?"

"But why am I here, ma'am? Why have I been brought here? What is the meaning of this outrage on an innocent and unprotected girl?" exclaimed Hermia, showing rare spirit for one of her gentle nature.

"What is the matter with you—what on earth are you talking about?" demanded the other, in her coarse, unwomanly way.

"You surely understand, ma'am, what I mean," replied Hermia, amazed that the woman, who evidently was to play the part of jailer, should strive to affect ignorance.

"No, I don't understand what you are talking about at all. I know that you are here in my house, of course, and I also know that there has been a bargain made for me to keep you, and in return you are to do certain work which I have for you, but as to your quarrel with anybody else, or any *outrage*, as you call it, I don't know anything about it."

"A bargain made for me to stay here and do work?" cried Hermia bewildered.

"That is what I said."

"A bargain with whom?"

"Ah, now, you are asking what I don't know. I didn't have the arranging of the affair. My husband attended to that. All I know is that you were to come here and stay for awhile."

"But I do not wish to stay; I wish to go home to my sister. I have been decoyed away from her in the most brutal manner, and unless I am instantly permitted to go away I shall make complaint to the proper authorities and all concerned in this outrage shall be punished!"

Never before had Hermia spoken with such spirit, and after the words were said she was almost frightened at her own boldness.

"Well, I don't know anything about all that; it isn't any business of mine," the woman answered, not in the least alarmed by the threat. "You are here and you have got to stay a certain time and do a certain amount of work, and that is all there is to it. And as for any law, authorities or officers troubling me, that is where you are a little out. It's a mighty lonely spot here, away up in these mountains. Why, there ain't a house for two miles in any direction, and as it is off the main road no travelers ever come nigh it. A dozen people might be murdered here, and buried, and no one would be the wiser for it. If you will take my advice, while you are in this house you will do exactly as you are told, and if you don't, I give you fair warning, it will be the

worse for you. Give up all ideas of trying to get away and make up your mind to settle down and be content. I tell you, you will be a great deal better off if you do, but if you are obstinate and try to kick against the traces, you will only have yourself to blame if harsh measures are used."

"Oh, if you are a woman, and have a human heart, surely you will not keep me here, torn as I have been from the side of my dear sister, the only living relative that I have in the world who cares aught for me? Oh, let me go and Heaven will bless you for the deed!" pleaded the poor girl, with outstretched hands and streaming eyes.

But she might as well have talked to the winds for all the good it did.

"Don't snivel like a big baby," retorted the woman, "and don't whine about your sister; she's all right, and I'll bet a dollar ain't troubling her head much about you. Just make your mind that you are going to stay here and be a good girl and we won't have the least trouble. You may as well make up your mind first as last. I have agreed to keep you and I intend to do it. You can't get out of this room, and even if you could, you would be discovered before you could escape from the house; and even supposing that by a lucky chance you got out of the house, there are a couple of dogs in the yard who would tear those nice limbs of yours into a hundred pieces before you could get a dozen yards away. So stop fretting; make up your mind to be contented and we will get on very well together."

"But this is shameful treatment, and I have never done anything to deserve it!" the poor girl protested, pale with terror.

"You will be treated like a princess if you will only be reasonable. What is the good of your cutting up rusty? It won't help you any, and it will only compel me to make things uncomfortable for you, and I *will* make 'em uncomfortable enough too if you don't do as I say. If you are ugly, I will keep you here on bread and water, and if that don't tame you, I'll cut off the bread and bring you down to water alone; and if *that* don't humble you then I will strip the clothes off that dainty lack, tie you to the bed-post, and try the effect of a cowhide on your soft white flesh, until the very blood comes."

And the woman, approaching the girl, assumed such a ferocious aspect that Hermia, wild with fright, retreated from her to the further corner of the apartment.

"Oh, mercy, mercy, spare me!" shrieked the terrified prisoner, and then, overcome with fear, she gave a loud cry and fainted dead away.

The woman remained motionless for a moment gloating over her work and then with a savage laugh she approached her.

"I guess I will not have much difficulty with this lady-bird. If starvation don't make her do what I want the cowhide will, sure!"

CHAPTER IX.

HERMIA'S TASKS.

THE woman bent over the senseless girl, picked her up as easily as if she had been but a babe

and placed her upon the bed; then unloosening her garments she began to chafe her hands.

Slowly consciousness returned to Hermia, but when she opened her eyes and looked upward into the harsh face of the ogress a shudder shook her delicate form.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid; I ain't a-going to hurt you if you will only mind me and do as I say."

A deep sigh came from Hermia's lips, as she reflected how utterly helpless she was.

"Now if you say you will be reasonable, and won't worry me any more about going away, I will go down-stairs and bring you up a nice breakfast, coffee and bread and butter, and some nice fresh eggs."

Again Hermia sighed, but when she thought the matter over she came to the conclusion that it would be useless to resist, for by assuming to be resigned the chances of escape were doubled.

"I *must* make myself contented; there is nothing else for me to do," she replied, acting upon this idea.

"That is the way to talk! What is the use of being ugly, particularly when it won't do you any good? Now, be patient for a few minutes and I will bring you up your breakfast, and, after you eat that, then we will get to work."

The woman was careful to lock the door when she departed, and Hermia understood from this that the vigilance of her keeper would not be likely to be relaxed even if she did assume to be contented.

She fell to speculating upon the nature of the work which she was to do, but of course was not able to conjecture what it could be.

In a short time her keeper returned, bringing quite an appetizing repast on a waiter, and also another chair. Placing the breakfast upon the table, she invited the girl to eat.

"There, fall to at once," she said. "If you will only be good and do as you are told, you will be treated just like a queen, but if you are ugly and obstinate, the road you will have to travel will be so hard that it will make you wish you were dead ten times a day!"

Now timid Hermia stood in mortal fear of this coarse creature, and did not doubt that her jailer would be as good as her word, so resolved to comply with all she demanded, if possible, and thus escape bad treatment.

She ate the breakfast, and really enjoyed the meal, for the food was good and carefully cooked—the woman sitting near by and watching the girl narrowly, as though striving to make out whether she had really accepted the situation or not.

The meal concluded, the woman took up the tray.

"Now we will see about work," she commenced. "I'll be back in a few moments."

Again there was the same care about locking the door, and again Hermia wearied her mind in wondering what could be wanted of her.

When the woman returned she brought with her a portable writing-desk, which she opened upon the table.

"You are a good writer, Jenny, I believe?" she said.

"I beg your pardon, my name is not Jenny, but Hermia," the orphan replied, amazed at being thus accosted.

"Oh, I don't care what you have been called!" the other retorted, impatiently. "Jenny is a good name, and it is a favorite with me; so Jenny is what I shall always call you, and you mustn't forget to answer to it either, while you are in this house. My name, by the way, is Molly. Now, you are a good writer, I believe?"

"Yes, ma'am; I was always considered so at school."

"And I am a good writer, too, although you would hardly think so to look at my big fists, and yet there was one trick with the pen in which I am not at all proficient; I can't imitate. Now I have seen people, not half as good writers as I am, who could imitate almost any handwriting so exactly that the original writer could never have told the difference."

"I have a gift in that way," replied Hermia, innocently, never dreaming what dark object her jailer had in view.

"Oh, you can imitate handwritings then?"

"Very well indeed; they used to say so at school."

"Sit down and give me a specimen of your skill," and the woman placed a chair so that the girl could sit at the desk. "I always had a curiosity about that sort of thing, and perhaps when I see how you do it, I can learn, for I suppose it is only a trick, after all."

"I think not," said Hermia, taking up a pen and preparing to write. The woman had placed a blank sheet of paper before her. "I never had any one teach me. I think that it is a natural gift and cannot be taught, although I have no doubt that one having it could improve by practice, like anything else, but if the gift is wanting, all the teaching and practice in the world will not be of any use."

"May be so, and perhaps that is the reason why I never could do anything at it. But you try. Here, copy that signature, that's a hard one to imitate, I should think."

The woman had drawn a little package of papers from her pocket, and the girl saw at once that they were bank checks. She took the top one and placed it on the desk as she spoke.

It was a check for twenty-five dollars drawn on a New York bank and signed W. H. Vanderbilt.

"No, I do not think that is very difficult," and, after a few preliminary flourishes to try the pen and ink, both of which were superb—the pen gold, and a really beautiful tool—she wrote the signature upon the blank paper.

Hermia certainly was a genius in this line, for the signature was such an exact imitation of the genuine that the woman could not repress a cry of admiration.

"Well, well, deary, if you can't handle the pen then I wouldn't say so!" she cried. "I can't see the least bit of difference between the two," and she compared them carefully. "Perhaps with a glass one might detect a difference." Then she drew a magnifying lens from her pocket, such as is in common use in banks, and examined the signature through it.

Hermia was pleased at this tribute to her skill, for this was her one great accomplishment.

"Just alike under the glass, too! It is really marvelous," the woman observed. "But I guess you couldn't imitate all the writing

though—the filling out and the figures as well as the signature.”

“Yes, I can, and that is my gift. Just as the naturalist will from the single bone of an extinct animal reconstruct the whole, so I, if given a single good specimen of any handwriting, will be able to write a page or more in the same hand.”

“Try it! Here is a blank piece of paper. Now the first one is numbered 10,050, make this 10,051, and instead of twenty-five dollars write five thousand four hundred and fifty, and see if you can make it so exact that no one would suspect that the two were written by a different person.” And as she spoke the woman placed a blank check before the girl, the check being on the same bank and in every respect a complete counterpart of the other.

Thus put upon her mettle, and so ignorant of all business affairs that she did not comprehend the nature of the task set before her, Hermia soon completed the check.

Again a cry of amazement escaped from the woman, and her hands trembled as she grasped the glass with which to inspect this masterpiece, while Hermia wondered at her agitation.

“It is perfect! perfect!” the woman exclaimed. “Ah, my ducky, you are a treasure, indeed, and if you will only be good and content yourself to stay with me, you shall have anything in the world that you want! Now, dear, here are two letters that I wish you to copy, and if you can do it as well as not, imitate the handwriting so that they will all be alike.”

This was a strange request, and the letters were stranger still.

The first was in a woman's hand and recited that the writer was the widow of a Methodist clergyman, the Reverend Mr. Jacob Blinkerstoff, and by the unexpected death of her husband, herself and five small children were left entirely destitute, with the exception of a small piece of property heavily mortgaged. If she could accumulate sufficient funds to keep possession of this property, she could derive from it income enough to support herself and helpless little family, and she begged the favor of a small gift, even as low as a dollar would be thankfully received. The letter was interspersed with Scriptural quotations and was a document eminently calculated to deceive the unwary.

The second letter, evidently written by a man, merely said that Mrs. Jacob Blinkerstoff was well known to the writer as a pious and deserving woman, and he recommended her to the good offices of all Christian people, but there was no signature.

“Here is the signature, and instead of imitating the handwriting of that letter, build up a letter from the signature, since you are able to do so.”

The signature was on a little scrap of paper which looked as if it had been torn from a larger piece, and it was the name of a divine whose reputation is world-wide.

All this seemed very mysterious to Hermia, but she thought it best to comply with the request, and when the work was completed the woman was loud in her praises.

“Now, then, my ducky, I want you to make a thousand copies of each one of those letters so

I can send them all over the country. I'm the minister's widow, my darling,” and here she grinned horribly, “and if the good people don't send me some money you and I and my five little ones will starve. But you needn't be afraid; those letters will fetch the stamps. Work as fast as you can, ducky, and you shall have a splendid dinner.”

With this assurance, she departed, leaving the girl much mystified.

CHAPTER X.

KATHERINE'S ADVENTURES.

LEAVING Hermia to work away at the strange task which “Molly” had given her, we will return to the elder of the orphan girls and relate the strange adventures which befell her.

Like her sister, when she recovered her senses she found herself in a strange apartment and in utter darkness.

Like her she sprung from the bed and groped about the room only to discover that she was a close prisoner, and then not knowing what else to do, laid down upon the bed and waited for the morning to come, but she could not sleep; the nervous excitement under which she was laboring prevented that.

She waited and waited but the welcome light of the morning came not, and then, when wearied with her long watch, she went on another tour of discovery, she was annoyed to find that though there was a door in one of the walls, there wasn't anything like a window.

All at once the truth flashed upon her, and she understood, too, why the air seemed so strange, she was in an underground apartment in some cellar into which the welcome light of the day never came!

When she made the discovery she became for a time almost frantic.

“Help, help!” she cried, at the top of her voice, and with her naked hands she beat against the stout wooden door.

But she was answered only by dismal echoes, and, exhausted at last by her fruitless efforts, she flung herself upon the bed and gave way to a flood of hysterical tears.

But when this storm of passion was ended she became unnaturally calm.

Hardly had she fallen into this state when she heard the door open.

Instantly she was on her feet.

The door closed again with a sharp “click,” but she was sure that some one was in the apartment.

Then there came the sound of a match being lit.

The feeble gleam appeared, dimly illuminating the room, then it was applied to a lamp, fastened to the wall, and in an instant a flood of light flamed forth and it revealed to her the young man who had been in the carriage, and whom the old gentleman had introduced as his son!

A smile of triumph was upon his ill-looking features, and the resemblance which his face bore to some one else's was solved, and in part explained the outrage by which she and her sister had been deprived of their liberty, for although Hermia was not imprisoned there

with her, she felt certain that she also had been entrapped.

"How do you find yourself this morning?" the young man asked, as unconcerned as though he was merely paying a morning call upon an esteemed acquaintance.

The girl drew herself up to her full height, a very Juno in her rage, and faced the intruder with an expression of withering contempt upon her beautiful face.

"And you then are the unmanly scoundrel who has rendered himself liable to the State Prison by committing this outrage?" she exclaimed.

Despite the brute's effrontery, he winced at this bitter speech, although he came prepared for a stormy scene.

"Now don't be unreasonable," he said, after hesitating for a moment; "it won't do you any good and you might as well accommodate yourself to circumstances, first as last."

"Is that door unlocked?" demanded the girl, as imperiously as though she were a queen and the man addressed one of the meanest of her subjects.

"It is not; it is a spring lock, which fastens of itself when the door is closed," he answered sullenly. This calm and lofty tone of contempt was something for which he had not bargained.

"You have the key?"

"Who else should have it?"

"Give it to me," and Katherine extended her hand commandingly.

"Oh, no, not much! that is cutting it altogether too fat!" responded the man insolently.

"Do you dare to refuse to let me out?"

"Do you suppose I am a fool?" he cried, angrily. "What do you take me for anyhow? I didn't know that I looked like an idiot, but I suppose I must, or else you wouldn't say such ridiculous things. Do you think I have taken all this trouble to get you here for nothing? Do you imagine I am going to open the door and let you go free simply because you command me to do so?"

"You will be wise to obey my command."

"Well, I shall not do so; you are here and you will stay until you are reasonable enough to come to some understanding with me. I presume you are puzzled over this affair and don't know what to make it. But you needn't be alarmed; there isn't any harm intended—that is if you behave yourself; but if you attempt to be ugly, why, the consequence will be upon your own head and you won't have any one but yourself to blame. Now, if you will stop these tragedy-queen airs and sit down and listen patiently to me I will explain why you have been brought here."

"It is hardly necessary for you to go to that trouble for I think I understand all about it," the girl replied, quietly, with bitter contempt still in her tone.

It was the captor's turn to look astonished now.

"You understand all about it?" he repeated.

"Well, I'd like to know how that can be."

"If you had any brains you would know. I have recognized you."

"Eh?" and he stared dazedly at the girl.

She went on:—"I have but a single enemy

in all this wide world, and when a gross outrage like this abduction is committed, it is not wonderful I should know who is the guilty man!"

"How do you know that I am your enemy? You never saw me before last night."

"Very true, and last night I did not recognize you, for the coach was dark, and I did not notice you particularly; but here, the moment the light of the lamp illumined your face I recognized you immediately."

"I doubt it! I doubt if you could call my name."

"Abner Latchford!" replied the girl, promptly.

The countenance of the man changed; a bitter oath rose to his lips and it was only by a strong effort that he choked it back.

This recognition upset his plans, for he did not intend to let the girl know who he was until he had molded her to his wishes.

"I suppose it would only be wasting time to attempt to persuade you that you have made a mistake in this matter?"

"It would, most surely. Your father's features are almost exactly reproduced in yours. Jonathan Latchford is my enemy; he has done his best to persecute me ever since he discovered that I was determined to learn the truth in regard to the fortune which my father said he left for his children, and which I am now certain your father basely stole. But, though those ill-gotten gains made me rich, yet in other ways he has not prospered. Out of all his large family you are the only one who is left; death snatched them from him and all his money could not save them. Was it not a judgment upon him for the base crime which he committed when he robbed the widow and the orphans? And still so blind and headstrong is your father that, despite the warning which he has received, he persists in keeping on in the path of guilt. Perhaps he thinks it is an easy matter for a man possessed of his wealth and influence to crush two poor orphan girls, but behind them stands justice with her resistless sword. Already has your father felt the weight of the terrible blade; let him stop in his career of crime before the next blow falls, or else all chance of repentance in this world and forgiveness in the next may at one fell swoop be destroyed."

Like an inspired prophetess the girl had delivered the warning, and Abner Latchford, as he gazed upon her, thought he had never beheld a more beautiful woman.

"Well, I will own up," he said, after a slight pause; "I am Abner Latchford; but you are wrong in one thing, and that is about the old man—he doesn't know anything of this affair."

The girl looked incredulous.

"Oh, it's the truth! I'm giving it to you straight this time, upon my word of honor."

Katherine's lip curled in scorn at the idea of the word of honor of a man who could be guilty of such a crime as that by which she had been made to suffer.

"This is a little racket of my own getting up," he explained. "I won't attempt to deny that the old man means flight, but he hadn't exactly made up his mind what little game to work. Now, I was in the other room and over-

heard the conversation between you and him, and being struck with your beauty and pluck, I made-up my mind to take a hand in the affair, of course with the idea of making dad come down handsomely."

CHAPTER XI.

ABNER'S PROPOSAL.

"You are a regular stunner of a girl, and no mistake!" the young scion of the house of Latchford exclaimed, "and that is the reason why I have taken a fancy to you."

The look of utter scorn and disgust upon the girl's face would have convinced any one less blinded by egotism and conceit than this stupid villain of the folly of his conduct and words; but he only laughed at her expression.

"You don't like that, do you? Oh, well, you'll get used to it in time."

"Will I?" and there was a world of meaning in the tone and look.

"Why, certainly! We ain't used to each other yet, but that will come, you know. We must have time to get acquainted. Now, you're a real splendid girl, I know, and the more I see of you, the better I like you, and that will be the way it will work with you, I'll bet!"

"I should not be surprised!" the girl rejoined, with keen irony.

"Well, that is what I thought."

"Oh, I am quite sure of it! The moment I saw you I felt an instinctive dislike, and now that I have conversed with you, I am quite satisfied the more I see of you the greater will be my detestation of you."

Abner stared open-mouthed at the bold speaker for a moment. Then he grew pale in his rising anger.

"See here, you don't want to talk in that way to me!" he cried, threateningly. "I can be awful ugly when I choose."

"I do not doubt it in the least, and I can assure you that you will always appear ugly and disagreeable to me, whether you try to be so or not."

Young Latchford was silent for a moment, meditating how to tame this defiant beauty.

"Oh, well, I s'pose I ought not to mind what you say," he retorted at last. "All you women have got to talk just so much, or else you wouldn't be able to get along. I don't mind your talking so long as you do as I want."

"But that is exactly what I will not do!" cried Katherine, with fiery energy. "Do you think I am a slave to submit tamely to the rule of a master?"

"If you know when you are well off, you will do as I say!" he rejoined, menacingly.

"Dismiss that thought from your mind, for you will never make a slave of me!"

"Well, we will see about that; but now, I say, suppose you just give me a chance to explain myself. I mean to be fair and honest in everything, if you will only allow me to be."

"Oh, yes; this outrage, of which I am a victim, is a specimen, I suppose, of how fair and honest you intend to act."

"All is fair in love and war, you know. After the row you had with the old man, I thought there wouldn't be any use of my trying

to talk to you unless I got you in my power, and so I forced you to listen to me."

"I am in your power now, and I am forced to listen, so proceed and let me understand what you desire."

"Sit down," he said, bringing her a chair, "so we can talk comfortably."

The girl complied, and the young man went on to say:

"Now, then, you think you have got some kind of a claim against the old man."

"Yes, I am sure I have a *claim* against him. He has robbed my sister and myself of our inheritance. Perhaps the whole of his fortune came from the money which he stole from my family."

"Even if it was so, it would be a mighty hard thing to prove, you know."

"I am not so sure of that!" retorted Katherine. "If I have no claim, or, having one, yet no chance of succeeding in proving that it is just, why is your father so frightened about it? Why did he not allow me to go on in my weak and feeble way if he was so strong that he could afford to laugh at my efforts? Why did he take so much trouble to crush me? Why did he wrest house and home—everything—from my sister and myself, and drive us, homeless and friendless, out into the cold, cruel world? It does not look to me as if he could afford to laugh at the strength of my cause. On the contrary, it appears as if his own was so weak that he *feared* to allow me to gain the slightest headway, knowing that if I succeeded in gaining friends I would not have much difficulty in establishing my rights."

This able statement rather puzzled Abner. He had no doubt that the girl was perfectly right—that his father had obtained his wealth by appropriating what was another's; but, covered up as the theft had been, it did seem absurd to suppose that two penniless girls could disturb him in his possessions. And yet Abner knew that his "governor" was acting as if his case was decidedly weak, which might be due to Latchford's natural timidity, for the old man was cautious, and in any contest preferred to succeed by craft rather than by boldness.

"There's a deal of money against you, though," the young man remarked, "and I tell you, when it comes to a fight of this kind in New York city, the side that has the most money wins every time. Now, my idea is just this: until about a month ago, when I happened to overhear a conversation between old Marmaduke and my dad, I had no idea there was such a person as yourself in existence, but when I got on the track I went at it for all it was worth. I don't mind telling you my respected father and myself do not get on as well as we might. The governor has cut up rusty with me, half-a-dozen times. For a man worth a million or two he hangs on to his money in a disgusting manner. Of course like all young men I have sown some wild oats, and as the only son of a millionaire it was my duty to keep up my reputation, and as the governor didn't pony up the needful liberally enough, I helped myself, and the result was a precious row; I was unlucky enough, too, to get mixed up with some jolly good fellows who turned out to be

queer characters, and if the governor hadn't come to the rescue I would have been sent up the river to rusticate at the State's expense for a while. But, it wasn't my fault, you know; how could I tell that the 'gang' wasn't on the square? They didn't seem like 'crooked' men, at all; in fact, a nicer lot of fellows I never got in with, so there was really no occasion, you see, for the old man to keep throwing 'forger,' 'State-prison bird,' and similar affectionate names at me whenever he got his ugly up. One thing *was* lucky; my acquaintance with these gentlemen it was that learned me how to work the little job which captured you so neatly. Well, the moment I got wind of your matter, it struck me I might get an under bold on the old man and throw him. So, being as well posted as my unreasonable dad in regard to your movements, I knew when you arrived in the city and was watching for you when you came to the house, and if that meddling sneaking secretary hadn't interfered to let you in, I should, for I wanted you to see the old man, so I could get posted. I was in the next room and overheard every word of the conversation that passed between you two, and when I learned what the game was, I made up my mind to take a hand, so the moment you departed I went for the old man. I tell you he was all "broke up!"

For a young man who was supposed to be well educated, Abner Latchford used shockingly bad language.

"But I had him, for he was knocked clean off his pins when he found that I knew what was going on; and he was disgusted, too, to think that old Marmaduke had tried to double on him and get you to marry *him*. Of course his idea was to get hold of you and then he could bleed his employer, but as you wouldn't have it, that little racket failed. Now the idea came into my head that it wouldn't be a bad plan for *me* to try my luck; so I made a proposition to dad to take charge of your case and he was so mortally scared that he jumped at the offer, and I struck him for a thousand dollars for expenses, which he shelled out like a little man. Here is the whole thing in a nut-shell; I have taken a fancy to you, for you are just the kind of a girl to suit my book; I'll marry you, fair and honest, and then, if the governor is inclined to be ugly and *won't* make a fair divy with us, we will go for him, lively."

It was hard work for the orphan girl to restrain the words of contempt and disgust upon her tongue's end, but she did so and calmly replied:

"Your proposition has taken me so utterly by surprise that I must have time to think the matter over."

"Why, certainly; that is all right," his countenance brightening, for he had expected a stubborn and defiant answer. "Take all the time you like; don't hurry yourself, only the quicker you make up your mind the quicker we can bring the old man to terms."

The girl acted the role she had assumed so perfectly—that of a hesitating—half-inclined-to yield-consent woman, that the base son of an equally base father was completely deceived.

"Where is my sister? Is she safe?"

"Oh, yes; why, I wouldn't harm a hair of her head for the world; but of course I am obliged to keep her in strict confinement until you make up your mind, but you and I can make that all right with her after we are married."

It was as much as the girl could do to suppress her feeling of loathing for this young scoundrel, but she did, and only remarked:

"If any harm came to her it would put a stop to any bargain between us, you know."

"She will be treated just like an angel! Don't you worry about *that*."

"Is she in this house?"

Young Latchford hesitated; he was uncertain whether to tell the truth or to lie about the matter; but, concluding that Katherine might be more inclined to come to terms if she thought her sister was near her, he answered truthfully:

"Yes, she is up-stairs in the garret. You needn't be alarmed about her. I will see that no harm comes to her, nor to you, if you will agree to do as I want; but if you don't, I will not be answerable for the consequences. I'm desperate! I'm playing for a big stake, and if I don't succeed there is no telling what I may do."

And with this threat he arose.

"I will decide as soon as possible."

"There's a little closet there in which you will find your breakfast in about ten minutes," and he indicated the exact spot. "I will call in and see you before dinner—perhaps you will have your mind made up by that time. Good-by."

Then he departed, springing the door to behind him.

CHAPTER XII.

A DARING DEED.

AFTER he left the apartment Katherine sat motionless for quite a time, busy in thought.

"What is best for me to do?" she murmured.

"My sister is in the house—up-stairs. But is that the truth? Why not? What object has he to gain by deceiving me upon *that* point? Now then, how can I gain my liberty and also secure hers?"

This was a difficult problem to solve, and while meditating over it a noise in the closet that young Latchford had indicated arrested her attention.

She opened its door to find upon one of the shelves a tray containing a substantial breakfast. There was evidently a secret door in the wall at the back of the closet, through which the dishes had been passed, although Katherine was not able, after the most searching examination, to discover it.

At first she hesitated to partake of the repast lest some of the viands might be drugged. Particularly suspicious was she of the coffee; but, after carefully tasting of everything she concluded that her suspicions were unfounded, and so made a hearty meal, and as she ate, her mind was busy planning, and by the time she had finished the meal she had decided what to do to turn the tables upon her captor and make him a prisoner instead of her!

It was indeed a bold stroke for liberty—one likely to spring from the brains of a daring.

desperate man rather than from the wits of a gentle, loving woman. But, Katherine Montcal was one girl of ten thousand; although gentle and affectionate by nature, yet when the occasion demanded, she could display the courage of a lion as well as the cunning of a fox.

And the moment she resolved upon her plan, she set about finding means for rendering it successful.

She examined the apartment in the most thorough manner—floor, walls and ceiling, but discovered no signs to indicate that she was under espionage. Then she went to work.

First she stripped the clothes from the bed—a couple of sheets, a blanket and a comforter. She tore the sheets into strips four or five inches wide, and then, tossing the blanket upon the floor by the door, took one of the pillows and the bolster and arranged them in the bed, covering them up carefully with the comforter so that, at a little distance, it looked as if some one was lying on the bed with the clothes drawn up over the head.

"Now I must have a weapon in case my surprise doesn't succeed," she murmured, glancing thoughtfully around the room.

Her eyes fell upon the little table which stood by the wall, and upon which she had eaten her breakfast.

"The very thing!" she exclaimed, and, removing the breakfast dishes to the closet, she then upset the table and easily wrenched off one of the legs. This placed her in possession of a weapon capable of felling a strong man when wielded by such a desperate and determined girl as was this heroine. And why should she hesitate to strike for liberty even though she slew the bold, bad man who had entrapped her?

She was determined not to hesitate; she was resolved to secure her freedom, no matter who stood in the way!

After having completed her preparations she took a chair and placed it by the wall a yard or so from the door, and then turning the flame of the lamp down quite low, so that objects within the apartment could be just discerned, she sat down in the chair, spread out the blanket upon her lap, and waited.

Slowly passed the hours until in her hot impatience she began to get wearied at the tardy flight of time, and caught herself nodding once in a while, but with the patience of a second Job she waited, watching intently for the approach of her captor.

He came at last, just as he had said he would. She heard his footsteps in the passage without—heard him insert the key in the lock—heard the bolt spring back, then the door opened and young Latchford entered the apartment.

The door opened into the room, and Katherine had chosen a position so that when the door was opened she, being behind it, was concealed from view.

Latchford, unsuspecting of danger, fell into the trap. He noticed the dummy on the bed, which, in the dim light, looked astonishingly like a human figure.

"Oho! she has become tired and laid down to rest," he thought. "Well, that argues that she is not much worried, and is rather disposed to make the best of the situation. No doubt in time she will agree to do as I wish."

He swung the door shut, intending by the noise to waken the girl, and turned toward the lamp with his back to the captive.

This was the auspicious moment; the girl darted forward, threw the blanket over his head, and while he, taken by surprise, struggled in its folds, she caught hold of him from behind and tripped him up.

Abner went down to the floor all in a heap, and in falling hit his head sharply against the side of the wall, partially stunning him for a moment, and before he could recover his senses, with the strips torn from the sheet, the brave girl had bound him, hand and foot, so that he could not stir!

The victory was complete, and won with far less trouble than the captive had expected.

Young Latchford had the key of the door in his hand when surprised, so the girl secured it at once.

CHAPTER XIII.

LIBERTY!

THE path of freedom was now open, and Katherine was not slow to avail herself of it.

Putting on her hat and cloak she took the club in her hand, for other perils that might be encountered before she would get out of the house, and unlocking the door, left the dungeon-like apartment.

Closing the door carefully behind her, she put the key in the lock without, so that the prisoner might be relieved by his confederates after her departure; then she went forward.

At the end of the narrow passage in which she found herself, was a flight of stairs, down which a dim light shone, so the resolute girl had no hesitation in shaping her course.

She had left the room amid a smothered torrent of curses and threats from the man whom she had so cleverly entrapped, and of which she had not deigned to take the slightest notice, but now that the door was closed she could not bear a sound, so it was plain he would not be able to alarm the house.

Straight forward she went and ascended the stairs. There was a door at the top with a small glass window in the upper part, through which the light came.

"Suppose the door is locked?" Katherine murmured, as she placed her hand upon the latch, but it yielded readily to her touch, and passing through the doorway she found herself about midway of a long entry upon the ground floor of the house.

There was a door at each end of this entry, but from the appearance of the two the adventuring girl had no difficulty in deciding which was the front door and which was the back one.

In the entry Katherine hesitated for a moment—a weighty question in her mind.

"The house seems deserted," she soliloquized; "I do not hear a sound, and there is no one to prevent me from making my escape through either one of the doors." Her keen eyes had detected the fact that the keys of both doors were in the locks. "Now, shall I escape immediately, or shall I go up-stairs and try to discover Hermia so as to take her with me? But if I do that, am I not likely to meet some one who will try to prevent us from escaping, for though the house seems deserted, there may be

a dozen ruffians in it for all I know, and it is hardly probable that the master-fiend would be here all alone. But if I make my escape I can go to the nearest magistrate, make a complaint of the ill-treatment we have received, and with the proper officers come back and relieve Hermia. That will be by far the best course for me to pursue. And now, which door? Decidedly the front one, for that will allow me to reach the public road immediately!"

But, having come to this decision, hardly three steps forward had the girl taken, when the door opened suddenly, and the stout, stern-faced woman whom we have described in connection with Hermia, and who called herself Molly, appeared.

The surprise was mutual, but if anything the woman evinced the most astonishment. She held an empty plate in her hand, and had evidently just returned from disposing of some scraps.

"Well, well; here's a go!" she cried.

Katherine's face was pale, but the fires of determination blazed in her eyes, and from the position in which she stood, her right hand, which grasped the club, being at her side, the weapon was concealed amid the folds of her dress.

That the woman would attempt to prevent her from leaving the house Katherine surmised at once, from the expression upon her face, but this did not trouble the girl so much as the fear that there might be men within the dwelling whom the woman could bring to her assistance by raising the cry of alarm, for, although the other was larger, stouter, and apparently stronger in every way than the orphan girl, yet, thanks to the weapon with which she was provided, Katherine had no fears in regard to the result of an encounter between the virago and herself.

And the woman, too, noting the defiant bearing of the girl, understood at once that she was compounded of different stuff from her gentle and timid sister, so she thought it wise to begin harshly with her.

"What are you doing here, and how did you get out of your cellar? You had better go back at once or it won't be healthy for you!" and in order to emphasize her words, she shook her clinched fist.

But Katherine did not quail.

"Ah, you are a party to this dreadful outrage, then?" she cried indignantly. "Are you not ashamed—and do you not fear to look me in the face—are you not afraid that I shall make you pay dearly for this crime against the law?"

"Well, you are a bold one!" commented the woman, amazed. "But I say, you can't make anything by putting on any airs, here. We know how to take the ugliness out of all rebels, so if you know what is good for your health you will march down-stairs again!"

"You shameless creature! Do you dare to persist in your course of guilt? I command you to stand aside and let me pass!"

For answer the woman put her arms "akimbo" and indulged in a loud laugh, as if to intimidate the girl.

"Stand aside and let me pass!" again the orphan girl commanded.

"You go right down-stairs now, and stop your nonsense! You won't make anything by this—you will only bring harsh treatment upon yourself. Come, go down-stairs again like a good girl, and I won't say anything to anybody about this mad freak. If your lord and master, that is to be, were to know of it, why, the house wouldn't be big enough to hold him."

"My lord and master!" and the lip of the girl curled in supreme contempt.

"Well, you know who I mean. Go down-stairs again quietly or I'll call out and fetch him here in a twinkling."

"I don't believe you will; you had better call some one else."

"Oh, no! he's the man to look after you, and he wouldn't like any one else interfering in his business."

Katherine's heart gave a great leap; she inferred from this that there were no other men about the house!

"You will not be able to make him hear you!"

"Why not?" asked the woman, amazed at the confident tone.

"Because he is down in the cellar bound and gagged; he has taken my place and is now the captive."

"Molly" stared hard at the other for a moment; the statement seemed almost incredible.

"I tell you this so that you may go down and release him after I depart," Katherine continued. "And if you are wise you will stand aside and let me go in peace. I do not wish to harm you but I am determined to regain my liberty, no matter how great the cost!"

The woman began to be a little alarmed, the determination displayed by the girl was having its effect.

"Give over this foolish notion or I'll cry out and alarm the house!" she threatened. "If I can't stop you the men can, but I reckon you won't pass me without my spoiling that pretty face of yours."

"You cannot summon assistance, for you know very well that there are no men in the house, with the exception of the vile wretch whom I have imprisoned in the cellar."

"Whether I am alone or not you sha'n't pass!" cried Molly, with dogged determination.

"I will go free; and, what is more—I shall soon return with the officers and deliver you and your vile associates to justice."

"Oh, you will, will you? I see I'll have to take hold of you and shake this nonsense out of you!" cried the woman, fiercely, determined to put a stop to this talk and decide the question of supremacy at once.

The moment the other commenced to advance the orphan girl raised her club menacingly, and Molly came to an abrupt halt, somewhat dismayed at the unexpected sight.

"Ah! you've got a club, have you?"

"Yes, and now what chance do you think you will have in trying to stop me!"

"If you hit me one good blow with that you would kill me!"

"Stand out of my way then and you won't run any risk!"

"Hang me if I don't stop you!" cried the woman, and taking deliberate aim she flung the

plate at Katherine's head, but the missile missed the mark by an inch, and, whizzing past the girl's head, was shattered into a hundred pieces at the end of the passage.

With all her blood in a flame, Katherine swung the table-leg in the air, and, as the woman attempted to seize her, dealt her a heavy blow.

Molly attempted to ward off the stroke by raising her arm, but she was not quite quick enough, and the club struck both arm and head, eliciting a howl of mingled rage and pain, but, in a moment, recovering herself, with a cry like a wild beast, mad with rage, she Fury sprung again at the girl, when Katherine dealt her a blow upon the head with the club, so violent, that it felled the woman upon the instant.

CHAPTER XIV.

HERMIA PLUCKS UP COURAGE.

To return now to the younger sister.

She worked faithfully at the task of copying the two letters until about twelve o'clock, when she was disturbed by the entrance of the woman.

"Just dropped in to see how you was a-getting along, deary," she observed, as she entered, taking care as usual to lock the door after her.

"I have finished quite a number," and she pointed to the copies of the letters lying upon the table by the desk.

Hermia had moved the table over to the window, so that as she worked she could command a view of the country without. Limited and desolate enough, too, it appeared, for there was nothing to be seen but a little patch of meadow land and a great dreary wood. A wilder spot the girl's eyes had hardly ever looked upon.

And as her busy pen had traversed the surface of the paper she had calculated upon the probability of some unknown knight emerging from the depths of the gloomy wood intent upon rescuing fair damsels in distress, but the old forest was so desolate that not even a bird seemed to be stirring within it, let alone a human.

"I am afraid I should wait and pine here for a long time before any gallant comes from that gloomy forest ready to do battle for me," she had murmured, just before the woman appeared.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" Molly exclaimed, as she took up the copies and examined them with a critical eye. "They couldn't be better done! Why, they are all as much alike as two peas—as alike as though printed from a copper-plate! Ah, my dear, you are a treasure, and now for the first time in your life you have got a chance to use your wonderful skill to advantage. Be good and you shall be treated like a queen. You shall have all that money can buy. You are a beautiful girl! Oh! wouldn't you look well in a nice silk dress, trimmed with rich old lace and with plenty of costly diamonds to set off your rare beauty! And you shall have them all, dear, if you will stay with me and do as I say. And there won't be any risk for you, either. We will have other people to do the passing, and if anything should happen to go wrong, and the trick is discovered, why, all they can do is to

take the man, for I will fix it so that there won't be any suspicion attached to either you or me. Let me alone for that! I'm no novice in the business, but have been working this crooked stuff off for the last twenty years."

Hermia looked up, amazement written in every line of her face. She could not make head or tail of what the woman had been saying, except that she was speaking about their being engaged in some wrong-doing, but of what nature, she hadn't any idea.

Molly saw by the girl's face that she did not understand, and she burst into a loud laugh.

"Bless your dear little innocent heart! You ain't up to snuff, are you? Well, it don't make any difference; perhaps it is just as well that you shouldn't know; but I wouldn't have believed that there was such a greeny as you are in the world. You must know what this piece of paper is?" and she took out a check and laid it before the girl.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, it is a bank check."

"And when you present it at the bank they give you money for it."

"Yes, madam, I understand that."

"Well, that is enough for you to know, so we won't go into any particulars. Here, try your skill at imitating this handwriting; it's a difficult one," and she spread the check out carefully before the girl, and then placed a blank one, but on the same bank and exactly similar in every way, by its side.

"Pay to Leonardo Vinci, or order, the sum of forty-five dollars," said the girl, reading the inscription upon the desk; "signed, 'Jay Gould.'"

"Yes; now write, 'Pay to Leonardo Vinci, or order, the sum of'—let me see—well, it might as well be a good haul this time—the sum of ten thousand and fifty dollars," and be very careful about the signature; number the check the same as the other, and put on the same date."

The girl executed the task very slowly this time, for some strange ideas were in her mind; she could hardly bring herself to believe that the suspicion which had crept into her brain was true, and yet, what else could be the reason for these mysterious proceedings?

"Good! Splendid!" exclaimed Molly, when the check was drawn out. "But let me try my glass upon it!" And then, as carefully as on the preceding occasion, she examined the writing by the aid of the lens.

"The sharpest paying-teller couldn't tell it from the original," she murmured.

Then she drew out the first check which the girl had executed and placed it on the desk, face downward, and the original from which it was copied, face upward, by its side. The other two checks, the copy and the original, she also arranged in the same way.

"Now, across the back of this first one write the signature, W. H. Vanderbilt, and indorse the other in the same way with Jay Gould's name and be very careful indeed to get them correct, for a blunder here would upset the whole business."

The single word "indorse" opened the girl's eyes, and convinced her that her suspicions were correct. She knew that checks had to be indorsed before being cashed, and in her ignorance of business supposed that neither one of

these two were of any value until the name was written on the back, not understanding that this indorsement was to enable the party in whose favor the check was drawn to get the money without having to be identified.

"Let me see; when I write the names, all Mr. Vinci will have to do is to go to the bank and get the money?" Hermia asked, pausing with the pen point to the paper, and looking up with such an innocent air that even the cold, case-hardened criminal was deceived.

"Yes, deary; Leonardo Vinci is a painter—an artist, you know; and Mr. Vanderbilt and Mr. Gould have each bought one of his paintings, and these checks are to pay for them, and after he gets the money on these checks, we are going to be married, deary, and then we will have you come and live with us. We will cross the water and you shall see all the sights in foreign parts, and be treated just like a princess!"

"But, there is a great difference between the sums set down in the original checks and those written on the copies."

"Oh, that's all right; both of the gentlemen were so pleased with the paintings that they told my beautiful boy to draw whatever sums he wanted," responded the woman in the most careless off-hand way, trusting to the girl's innocence to receive the story without question.

"Then, when these two checks that I have drawn are presented at the bank they will be paid without question?"

"Of course they will! Why both the men would be willing to swear that the signatures were written by their own hands; and, my deary, that is where your skill comes in. Oh, we'll make a haul on those documents—don't you be afraid about that!"

With a quick motion, Hermia seized the two forged checks and tore them into a dozen pieces, for now she understood the base work that was expected of her, and her countenance flamed with indignation as, with firm-set lips and flashing eyes, she looked up into the woman's face.

A howl of rage came from the lips of the other, and she would have thrown herself upon Hermia and torn the precious checks from her hands, had not the girl been so quick.

"Oh, you wretch! Why did you do that?"

"Do you think you can make a *forger* of me, vile woman?"

"Oh, you deceitful hussy! There's thousands and thousands of dollars gone, and we could have collared them just as easy as anything!" groaned the woman in utter disgust.

"And these vile lies!" and with the word, Hermia seized upon the letters which she had written and tore them into atoms. "Now they are destroyed! Oh, what an awful woman you must be to lend yourself to such fearful crimes!"

"And what a little fool you are to dare to attempt to brave me, and you here helpless in my power!" hissed the woman, shaking her clinched fist with savage malice right in Hermia's face, but the gentle, humble girl, for once in her life, had got her temper up, and now in her rage, looked more like her superb elder sister than she had ever done before.

"You may kill me if you like!" she cried, not flinching in the least from the rage of the

infuriated woman. "I don't care what becomes of me! I would rather die than live and act as *your* creature and follow your footsteps in a life of crime!"

"Live? Well, you shall live, but such a life as will make you curse every hour of your miserable existence, and wish for death as a welcome release!"

"You cannot frighten me with your threats, you miserable creature!" Hermia retorted. "Just reflect upon what your fate will surely be if you keep on in this life of crime. Think of the time when you will be dragged before a judge to answer for your misdeeds, and then perhaps be sent to prison for the rest of your natural existence."

"Bah! a prison has no terrors for me! I have done my time in the stone jug, and am ready to try it again if the plunder offered is big enough to warrant the risk; but I tell you, girl, I pity you. Do you know—can you guess how I am going to break you down?"

"No," replied the girl proudly, and with no fear in her face, although the woman was glaring at her like a fiend.

"You are the only one I have ever found who can do the work I want to my satisfaction, and I am determined that you shall not escape me. I shall starve you into submission. Not a morsel of food nor a swallow of water shall pass your lips until you agree to do my will. You may hold out for a day or two, but I guess when you feel hunger and thirst tearing at your vitals you will be glad enough to yield!"

"Never! I will die first!"

"A week will decide that question, but you'll give in sure. Good-by, ducky," and then this she dragon departed.

CHAPTER XV.

A PERILOUS VENTURE.

It was remarkable—the change which had come over Hermia. Instead of yielding to the danger which confronted her, she was rising to confront it.

"I must—I will escape!" she cried, springing to her feet and glaring around her with distended eyes. Then she ran to the door and listened; the footsteps of the woman were dying away in the distance as she descended the creaky stairs.

Cautiously the girl tried the strength of the door; but it was good solid wood, and being securely locked from the outside, it was evident that no egress could be had in that direction.

Then she hastened to the window; it was a small casement, with an upper and lower sash; the upper one was immovable; the lower was clearly intended to be used, but it had been nailed down. And even if she could open the window it was about twenty-five feet from the ground.

"And where will I procure a ladder, not having the wings of a bird?" she exclaimed, despondently.

Her eyes fell upon the bed, and in an instant stories which she had read of people descending from upper windows by means of sheets and bed-clothes, torn into strips and knotted together to make a rope, flashed into her mind.

"There is my ladder, fast enough!" she cried,

her tone now full of joy. "The only puzzle is to get the window open."

She examined it carefully; the blood of an inventor was in her veins, and on this occasion the daughter proved to be worthy of her sire.

Although the window was securely fastened with heavy nails driven in above the lower sash, yet the strips of wood which held the sash itself in place were fastened with small nails, and by means of almost any tool—the blade of a strong knife, or a common nail even—the strips could be pried from their places.

Neither knife nor nail had the girl, but suddenly she thought of that now indispensable article to a lady's toilet, a button-hook. She had hers in her pocket, and immediately went to work upon the window.

A few minutes' effort proved that she would have no difficulty in removing the sash, so she suspended work there to prepare the ladder.

"Two sheets, which are about two yards long, torn in two, lengthways, and knotted together, will surely be rope enough and strong to support me. It's lucky that I am a light weight. If I were tall and stout now, I should be afraid to trust myself to this fragile stuff, for it is old and weak. It is lucky the bedstead is near the window so that I can tie the end of the rope to it." And while she thus soliloquized her nimble fingers were working busily.

Soon the rope was finished; then she tied it to the bedstead, removed the sash and peered cautiously out from the window, anxious to see if anybody was near at hand who might interfere with her project.

Not a soul was in sight, not a sound broke upon the stillness.

The girl stood by the window a moment, as if deliberating.

"Is it wise," she thought, "to risk my life by trusting to this old and half-rotten stuff? Is it wise to make the attempt now, instead of waiting until darkness comes on? 'Yes,' I think is the answer to both questions. The rope, surely, will support my light form; and if I wait, something may interfere with my plans. I may be removed from this room, or some other unforeseen accident may occur. Not something tells me it must be now or never!"

Then to her mind came what the woman had told her.

"The dogs!" she murmured, and she leaned out of the window with a frightened, anxious look upon her face.

"It would be horrible after I reached the ground to have such fierce brutes spring upon me!"

But not the slightest sign of life could she discover, either beast or human. The place and the neighborhood seemed utterly deserted.

"I must risk it!" she said at last, desperately.

And with a brief prayer, committing herself to the protection of that kind Heaven which heretofore had been so good to her, she lowered the rope out of the window, and passing through the casement, descended hand over hand like an old salt; but when she came to the end of the rope she discovered, to her dismay, that she had made a mistake in her calculation, and that it did not reach within eight or ten feet of the ground.

It was too late now to remedy the error. All

she could do was to drop, and drop she did. The shock threw her forward upon her hands and knees, and though it jarred her considerably, yet she escaped without injury.

"Now, if I can only succeed in getting away from the house without attracting notice," were her thoughts as she rose to her feet.

The window from which she had descended was in the rear of the house, and was the only one in the house so situated; hence the descent could not have been noticed by any one within the dwelling.

With fear and trembling she went to the corner of the building, turning to her right, and peered around it.

The coast was clear; no one was in sight, and in plain view was the road, lonely and desolate enough, and which in a very short space lost itself in the gloomy wood.

"Oh, if I could only reach the trees without being observed I would be safe!" she murmured.

Fortune seemed to favor, for on the side of the house which she had chosen all the window blinds were closed, and as they were regular, heavy shutters, they effectually cut off the view from the inside.

With timid, noiseless steps Hermia now hurried toward the road.

Two dangers only were to be feared: some one in the house might notice her as she passed by the front, and her terrible fear, the dogs, might be lurking in the neighborhood.

She was not so afraid of the people in the house as she was of the dogs. It might be possible no one was at home but the woman, and if so, Hermia felt satisfied that, with a fair start, she could easily outrun her.

But the dogs! Of all things in this world the girl most dreaded a savage dog. So, as she went along, her eyes fell upon a stick about a yard long lying upon the ground; gleefully she seized upon it as an offensive weapon.

She reached the front corner of the house, looked carefully around it, and discovered to her joy that all the blinds there were also closed.

The chances were good now that she could reach the road without being observed, and as for the animals, there were no indications that any were in the neighborhood.

She stepped boldly forward, but not five paces had she gone when, with a fierce growl, a huge yellow dog rose from a nest which he had occupied in a cluster of bushes by the side of the path leading to the road.

For a moment the girl's heart seemed to stand still with fright. The beast was a vicious-looking fellow who evidently meant mischief, for he was displaying his keen, white teeth in anything but a friendly manner.

To run of course was useless. To use the stick might be equally so, and also alarm the house.

Then to her mind came the tales of solitary travelers suddenly encountering wild beasts, and who had compelled monarchs of plain and jungle to abandon the road to them by simply staring the animal out of countenance. While having no faith in these stories, yet under the circumstances she felt that it would be far better to face the dog boldly than to retreat in fear.

And so with a gentle, "Good dog, nice doggie," she advanced upon him.

The animal evidently did not understand this and was suspicious of the stick which the girl possessed, so, as the girl advanced, he moved around to one side, still growling and betraying a decided intention to attack the girl upon a favorable opportunity.

Hermia, not daring to turn her back upon the brute, was forced to turn around and retreat backward toward the road, brandishing the stick, and changing her friendly salutation of "good doggie," into, "Don't you dare to come near me, you nasty brute or I'll hit you with this stick!" which threat he seemed to understand well enough: he evidently had a wholesome dread of a cudgel; but when he saw his prey gradually approaching the road, getting out of his reach, he rushed forward, circled rapidly around the girl, and at last sprung directly at her.

For a wonder, despite the dreadful fear which made her fairly sick at heart, Hermia retained her presence of mind, and as the brute leaped forward she dealt him a heavy blow on the head with the stick.

As luck would have it, the end of the stick struck the dog in the eye and with a terrible howl of pain he rolled over and over rubbing the wound with his front paws.

But—sore mishap! The force of the blow broke the stick in two and neither piece was long enough to be of any service.

There were plenty of stones about, though, and Hermia hastily secured a couple and then backed toward the road as fast as possible.

A few seconds and the dog was again after her, savage with rage and pain.

CHAPTER XVI.

TIMELY AID.

"Oh, if I only had a knife or a pistol, you brute!" the girl cried, as the now infuriated beast rushed upon her, inspired with new courage upon perceiving that the stick had disappeared.

Just as he was crouching for a spring, while Hermia, disarmed, stood in mortal terror, but ready with the upraised stone to strike, the door of the house opened suddenly and Katherine came rushing out, the effective club, which had already done such good service, in her hand.

After beating down the woman, as related in a previous chapter, Katherine had lightly sprung over her and hurried forth, coming from the house just in time to be of the utmost service to her sister.

Perceiving the crouching dog, and her sister, standing like a statue, she comprehended all, and with loud cries rushed upon the dog. The brute, amazed at this attack in the rear, wheeled around to meet the new danger, and as Katherine ran toward him he sprung at her, but as the dog rose in the air she dealt him a blow that fairly made the brute's skull ring.

The force of the blow beat him down to the ground, and before he could recover from the shock, the brave girl gave him half-a-dozen

more strokes upon the head and back which rendered him a defeated and disgraced dog.

In another moment, the two orphans were in each other's arms, shedding joyful tears at the unexpected meeting.

"Oh, Katherine! I didn't know what had become of you!"

"Nor I, what had befallen you, although I was assured that you was safe. But come! We mustn't waste time in talking; we must get away from here at once, for there is no knowing who may be in the house, although I have an idea no one is there but Abner Latchford and the old woman, both of whom I have had to fight just like a man."

"Abner Latchford!"

"Yes, I will explain as we hurry along!"

So, away the two sisters went.

Straight through the timber the road ran; it was nothing more than a wood-path, about a quarter of a mile long from the main road, out of which it came, to the house where it ended.

When they reached the broad, and evidently well-traveled highway, the fugitives breathed more freely, although at first, so utterly ignorant were they of the locality that they were in doubt whether to turn to the right or the left.

"Let us go to the right," suggested Katherine; "we always use our right hand more than our left, you know; anyway, neither one will be likely to carry us back to that miserable old house!"

So, turning to the right, the two trudged along the highway.

It was a lucky selection as it happened, for after the woman had recovered from the effects of the violent blows of the table leg, she hurried to the cellar, released young Latchford, and then, swearing vengeance, the two, accompanied by the dog, whose battered head plainly showed that he too had felt the prowess of the courageous girl—they started in pursuit, determined to recapture the fugitives at all hazards?

But when they came to the main road they turned to the left, for New York lay in that direction.

For a couple of miles the two girls walked along before they encountered any one, and during this time each sister related to the other all that had occurred since they had been separated. The first person they encountered was an aged Irishman, driving a cow.

"We must inquire of this man and find out where we are," Katherine observed when she saw the man approaching.

"Good-day, sir! How far is it to New York?" asked Katherine, as the man came up to them.

"New York, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mebbie it's twenty miles."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermia, astonished that they were so near, for she had an idea that they were away off in the wilderness.

"Which is the nearest way to get there?"

"Is it walking you mane?"

"Well, to walk, or to go by any conveyance, if there are stages or cars handy."

"If you walk, you want to turn right 'round and go back, for as long as you kape on this road, and in this direction, you'll make Albany afore ye will New York."

"Yes, but we don't want to walk if we can help it."

"If ye like boat riding, kape on as ye are and take the furst turn to the right; that will bring ye to the river, where ye'll get a boat for the city."

"That is what we want!" Katherine exclaimed. Then she thanked the man and again the two orphans went on their way.

They followed the directions, and in about half an hour found themselves in the neighborhood of the pleasant section of country so well-known to New Yorkers as Closter landing, on the west shore of the Hudson. From a little boy, playing in the outskirts of the village as they entered it, they ascertained the name of the town and also procured the information that they could get a boat for New York, "almost any time."

Luckily Katherine still had the change from a ten-dollar note in her pocket, just as she had received it from the hotel-keeper, so she was not without funds.

They went straight to the landing and from a surly sort of a man, lounging on the wharf, they obtained the information that a New York boat would be along pretty soon.

"Take the first boat," the man added, as he sauntered away, and relying implicitly upon this information brought the girls into trouble, for fate, still being in a capricious mood, deigned to further persecute the innocent wanderers.

The first boat that came along was not the boat for the city, but on the contrary was a freight craft, bound up the river, which stepped at Closter to land some goods.

In blissful ignorance of this fact the girls went on board and not until the steamer had got out into the stream did Katherine discover that all was not right, and inquiry speedily revealed the truth, but the anxiety of the orphans was relieved by the intelligence, that at the next landing, they could go on shore and take the other boat of the line which would be along about nine o'clock that evening.

Satisfied with this and never thinking at what an unseemly hour they would arrive in the city by taking the nine o'clock boat, the girls resigned themselves to the situation.

At the next landing they got off, took advantage of the wait to procure some refreshments, and then, when the little steamer came along, went on board, taking care this time to ascertain they were on the right boat.

There were few passengers on board; this boat like the other being chiefly devoted to freight, and that was the reason why it arrived in the city after midnight, so that its cargo of fruits and vegetables would be in the city for the morning market.

There was only one female passenger on board besides the orphans—a stout, rather coarse-featured woman, dressed plainly and looking like some farmer's wife.

She had a pleasant way with her, despite her ill looks, and getting into a conversation with the girls in an ingenious way, wormed out of them the intelligence—without appearing to do so, that they were strangers in the city and did not expect any one to meet them when they landed.

"Oh, my dears, do you know what time you will get into the city?" she exclaimed.

The girls answered that they did not, but added that they expected it would be late.

"About one o'clock, and if you haven't any friends to meet you, or no place to go, what on earth will you do at such an hour?"

This was something the orphans could not answer.

"You'll have to go to a hotel; you can't walk the streets until morning, because you would be liable to be arrested by the police as suspicious characters."

Then an idea seemed to occur to the woman, and she added:

"I tell you what you can do—you can come with me and stop until morning. I am going to the house of a relative who only lives a few blocks from the pier where the boat lands. She always has a couple of spare rooms ready and will be glad to be of assistance to you, for she is a very good-hearted woman, and will not charge you anything, either. I have a night-key, so we can get in without rousing the house, as I come to the city on business regularly. You can have a good night's rest, a breakfast in the morning, and then go where you like."

The offer was made so good-naturedly that the girls, without a suspicion of evil, gladly accepted it, and when they arrived in the city and looked at the lonesome streets of down town, deserted at this hour, glad were they that they had a place to which to go.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNPLEASANT REVELATION.

It was after one o'clock when the boat made fast to the dock. The city, like a mighty giant, was sleeping soundly, recuperating for the toils of the morrow.

"It is only a little ways, girls," the woman said, as she conducted them through the silent streets, now as quiet as though all the people in great Gotham were dead and buried.

The woman led them through an evil-smelling, bad-looking locality which appeared repulsive even when the worst of its features were disguised by the kindly mantle of darkness.

"My friend is in the market line and that is the reason she lives down in this neighborhood; 'tain't quite as nice as Fifth avenue, but nobody but decent, honest people live here."

Both girls were so honest and unsuspecting that they did not dream of doubting this statement, but after they got into the narrow streets, so dark and repulsive, they were alarmed every now and then by evil-looking faces, peering at them from shadowy corners, where the owners of the faces lurked, just like so many beasts of prey, lying in wait for victims.

The orphans drew closer to each other, and a feeling of terror took possession of them. This was an aspect of city life which they had never before witnessed.

The woman stopped at last at the door of a dingy old brick house, in the lower part of which was a liquor store, displaying upon its front a sign which read:—

THE OLD DISTILLERY.

BEST OF WINES AND LIQUORS SOLD HERE. FREE
CONCERT AND FREE LUNCH EVERY NIGHT.

The woman, whose keen eyes were ever on the watch, noticed that the girls looked askance at the display of bottles in the windows, and so she hurried them into the house as soon as possible.

"That is a great wholesale place, my dears; it supplies all the foreign steamers."

And so it did, with sailors maddened with bad liquor, who were worthless for duty until they had been a day or two at sea and had had time to work off the effects of the poison.

All was dark within the house, but the woman, instructing the girls to follow, conducted them to a small room in the rear of the house on the second floor.

There she lit the gas, which only burnt with a dim, uncertain light, as though the pipes were out of order.

The room was plainly furnished, but there was a good, comfortable-looking bed, which, after the exciting and fatiguing experience that the sisters had lately passed through, seemed particularly inviting.

"There now, ladies, I won't stop to talk and so keep you up, for you look all tired out. There's a nice bed for you, and the quicker you get into it the better. You see, there's a key in the door and also a stout bolt on it, so you can fasten yourselves in and be as snug as can be, without fear that any one will disturb you. I know what it is to sleep in a strange house and in a strange bed, and when I'm away from home I always feel more comfortable if I can lock and bolt myself in my room. Good-night." And then the woman retired.

The orphans felt strangely out of sorts, for this was not the kind of lodging-place they would have picked out of their own free will.

"It is only for one night, anyway!" Katherine consoled her sister, and carefully examining the apartment to be sure that there wasn't any one concealed in it, and adjusting the fastening of the door, they undressed, went to bed and in ten minutes were soundly asleep, so tired were they, locked in each other's arms.

And so soundly did they sleep that they recked not of the secret door in the wall—the old panel game—through which two skulking figures gained admittance to their room, and after prowling cautiously about it for a few minutes, retreated noiselessly through the secret door.

The sun was high in the heavens when, with a start, the sisters awoke at the same moment.

"Oh, Katherine, we have overslept ourselves; it must be very late!" exclaimed Hermia.

"No, no, the sun has not been long up, I guess."

They arose and looked for their clothes, which, when they had undressed before going to bed, they had placed on a chair near at hand, but not a single thing could they find. All had disappeared, even to their shoes and stockings!

They looked at each other in amazement.

"I am sure we put our clothes on these chairs," Katherine declared.

Hermia flew to the door, but neither bolt nor key had been touched.

"The door is fastened, just as we left it!"

Then a closet, with the door ajar, at the other end of the room, attracted her attention.

"Perhaps we put our things in the closet," she suggested.

An examination was made. In the closet were all the necessary articles of dress for the two girls, including slippers and stockings, made of coarse and common material, but not a single thing there which the girls could recognize as their own!

"Well, I suppose we will have to put these things on," Katherine remarked, surveying them, though with great repugnance. "We cannot stay the way we are."

"Oh, Katherine, what does it all mean?"

"Hermia, dear, I fear we have fallen into some terrible snare. Oh, what a dreadful place New York is! There are people here worse than savages. But let us dress ourselves and be prepared to meet whatever fate is in store for us. It is plain that we have been robbed of our clothes and what other mischief is intended, it is impossible to say; but I don't see how any one can harm us, for we are not in a wilderness, and if any one molests us our cries will surely bring assistance."

With anxious hearts the orphans put on the garments which fitted them tolerably well, although the slippers were rather large.

Then they went to the window and looked out, but the view was barred by an old building, apparently an unoccupied warehouse, which stood close to the window.

"Not a very inviting prospect," Katherine remarked.

"Not very!" responded a voice, and the orphans, turning in surprise, beheld the woman, who had so treacherously conducted them into this mysterious house, standing in the center of the apartment.

The sisters involuntarily glanced toward the door and perceiving that it had not been disturbed understood that there must be some secret way of entering the room. The mysterious disappearance of their clothing was now explained.

"Well, how did you sleep?" asked the woman helping herself to a chair, and then, without waiting for an answer, she went on. "You'll be quite comfortable here, I guess. I did as you told me. I sold your clothes and got twelve dollars for them and that is doing very well. Mike says he will keep you a month for that and will allow you all you can make for yourselves, so you ought to be able to do pretty well."

"What do you mean, madam?" exclaimed Katherine, "and how dare you sell our clothes? Who gave you authority to do anything of the kind? Don't you know that it is the same as stealing, and that the law will hold you answerable?"

"Well, well, here's a precious row! You are talking mighty big for a gal, wandering around without any home or friends. You have been in trouble, you know you have! and you were coming to the city to hide away!

Now you have got a nice place here, for Mike wanted two just such girls as you are."

"What does he want us for?" cried Katherine amazed.

"Why, to hand round beer and drinks to his customers, and to sing in the concert if you have any talent in that way. Mike, you know, keeps the saloon down-stairs, and two of the girls ran off with some sailors last week and I have been on the look-out for a couple more to fill their places ever since, and when I met you on the boat last night I spotted you instantly. I knew that you had been up to some mischief and were running away, so I thought you might as well come here as to go anywhere's else. Mind you! I don't ask you any questions. It's none of my business, or anybody else's for that matter, and while you are here you can keep yourselves just as select as any shop-girls in this town. All you have to do is to wait on the customers and be civil to them and if you don't choose to be familiar with any of them, that is your business, and Mike will see that you are not molested, by any one. It is a nice pleasant place and you might go further and fare a great deal worse."

"Madam, we will trouble you to return our clothes immediately!" Katherine exclaimed. "There isn't money enough in the world to hire us to stay here. You have made a mistake; we are not the kind of girls you take us for at all. We are ladies, both by birth and breeding, and have no reason to be afraid of any one or ashamed of anything; therefore you must let us depart in peace."

"Oh no, that isn't to be thought of!" retorted the woman, roughly. "You made a bargain with me last night on the boat to come here and be beer-girls and you can't back out now!"

"Oh, what a shameful story!" Hermia cried.

"Is it? Well, I am ready to swear to it in a justice court, my beauty!" the other asserted. "You have made a bargain and you must stick to it. We will keep you here for a time, anyhow."

"You cannot keep us! We will most surely escape."

"And in those duds, of course, for you can't go into the street without clothes, and then Mike and I will be after you and have you arrested for stealing *our* property. That is the way we work it with girls who are inclined to be ugly. And when we haul you up in a police court, do you suppose the judge is going to take your word against ours and you with our clothes on your backs, too, which we can prove? Won't he think it's the same old story—girls dissatisfied and trying to bolt? Can't we bring a dozen up, ready to swear that you two have served beer here for a week? Just you think the matter over and make up your mind to be good girls. You shall have until to-morrow to decide, and it won't be well for you if you choose to be ugly."

And with this parting threat the woman retreated through the secret door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OUT OF DARKNESS COMETH LIGHT.

A MISERABLE day, indeed, the two poor girls spent. The woman brought them up their meals, good substantial food and rich wines which she earnestly pressed them to drink. With the cunning of her sex she believed that if she could awaken an appetite for liquor the orphans would fall an easy prey, as many a poor girl has fallen, beset by the temptations which abound in all large cities.

But, not a single drop would either of the two touch, nor would they drink anything at all but pure water. They realized that they were in one of the dreadful dens which exist "alongshore" in all great seaports, and they felt perfectly satisfied that the wretches, into whose hands they had fallen, would not hesitate at any means, no matter how criminal, to force their victims to yield obedience.

"As long as they do not separate us, and we retain our senses, we are safe," Katherine had remarked endeavoring to cheer up Hermia who was greatly downcast.

The woman had been sparing of her words at each visit, but when she served the supper she informed the girls that she intended to come and spend the evening with them, in order to cheer them up a bit, but the orphans suspected that it was more for the purpose of attempting to persuade them to comply with the conditions that had been imposed, than anything else.

"It is only a question of time," Katherine had remarked, after the woman had departed. "If we hold firm they will get tired of keeping us, and will be obliged to let us depart, for they dare not kill us and I think they would hesitate before they harmed us in any way; still there isn't any telling to what lengths these desperate wretches will go."

An hour or so after the supper had been removed the woman came in.

The festivities in the saloon below were in full blast, for the scraping of a fiddle, the voices of the singers and the boisterous laughter of the patrons of the place came distinctly to the ears of the prisoners.

The woman sat down, and after she had talked for a few moments, the girls, innocent as they were, could see that she was much under the influence of liquor, which frightened the sisters, for to them there was hardly a more horrible sight than a drunken woman.

"Do ye hear that?" she asked, nodding her head toward the floor. "There's where you ought to be—down there, enjoying yourselves. Go it while you're young! You've only got one life to lead. Let it be a merry, sweet and short one, say I! But, you will get used to this sort of thing, in time. Lord love yer! I can remember when I was just as foolish about such things as you two kids are. Why, there was a time when I was an honest, respectable woman; you wouldn't think it, to look at me now! Why, I don't believe there is a cop in the precinct who would believe that I was ever anything but Dublin Betty, that is what I am called now; but there was a time when I could hold up my

head with the best of them for honesty, but in an evil hour I yielded to temptation, and I've been going down the ladder ever since. It was a mean, contemptible crime, too, I committed; I robbed the dead, but oh! wasn't I punished for it! and by the very man, too, who hired me to do the deed. Wouldn't you like to hear all about it? It's better than any yarn you can get hold of in the story papers, and it's all true, every word of it!"

The girls, thinking it would be best not to cross their enemy, nodded assent.

"Maybe it will be a lesson to you; maybe it will teach you that when you get into a rascal's power, he can grind you to the dust if he's got money and plenty of backing, and you are unfortunate enough not to have either," the woman remarked with bitter accent. "This affair I am going to tell you of happened about twelve years ago. I was a respectable member of society then. I was a widow, and kept a boarding-house, and among my boarders was a man—poor enough then—but who is worth two or three millions now, they say. My boarding-house was at Greenpoint, and this man was running a small varnish factory in the outskirts of the town in the meadows. His factory was not a success, for he didn't get up a good article, and it cost him too much to make it; he was over head and ears in debt, and his creditors were running after him for money all the time. He was so poor that he had to give up house-keeping, send his wife and children—he had five of 'em—out in the country to her father's, while he came and boarded with me.

"Well, just at the time when this man was going right down under the water, another man came forward, took him by the hair of his head, as you might say, and pulled him out. Man No. 2 was a genius; he could make anything! He had come to New York to sell some things which he had got up, and one of the things was a new way to make varnish, so that it could be got up for about half what it usually cost, and yet be a better article. He struck a bargain with my boarder. He had received a thousand dollars from some man for something he had invented; so, with the thousand dollars and his secret for making the varnish, he went into partnership with my boarder, who was to attend to all the details of the manufacturing and get one-third of the profits, while No. 2 took two-thirds.

"This put my man right on his legs again, but no sooner was all arranged—the partnership articles signed and the bargain concluded, than man No. 2 fell sick—he was boarding with me—and died. Then, what does my boarder do but offer me a hundred dollars down for to steal the dead man's papers, with a yearly annuity of five hundred dollars afterward. I was the witness to the partnership articles—I knew all about the transaction, and was the only one who could prove it. I was a miserable, wretched thief! I took the money and stole all the dead man's papers, so that when his family came to inquire about the fortune, which he had promised them, they couldn't find anything. Then I thought I would play sharp with my gentleman, for I felt pretty sure he would play sharp with me, if he got a chance.

I didn't give the papers to him nor did I destroy them, as I pretended, but I kept them so as to have a ring in his nose, for I had an idea that some time he would stop my five hundred dollars a year.

"For five years things went on all right. I got my money promptly, and my boarder with his varnish got rich, but all the time he was afraid of me, and was planning to play me a trick. He believed that I had the papers, and was determined to get them into his hands. He tried all sorts of games. My house was entered twice by masked men, who came expressly to get the documents, but they didn't succeed. Then, when he found he couldn't succeed in this, he made up his mind that he would stop my mouth, anyway. I had bought a little house, and through him had it heavily insured. The house was destroyed by fire; I was accused of setting it on fire to get the insurance, and the proof against me was so strong that I was sent to State prison; yet I was as innocent as either of you two kids. I had been entrapped by the man who had first led me into crime.

"I served my time, and when I came out, a ruined, desperate woman, I went to him for assistance, never suspecting, then, that he was the man who had done the mischief. He gave me what I asked promptly enough, and although he tried his best to find out about the papers, I stuck to my story that they were destroyed. The money he gave me was another trap, for he arranged it so that I was arrested for stealing. It was a large sum; my guilt was made clear, so back to Sing Sing I went again. There I made Mike's acquaintance, and he advised me to let the matter drop, for he said that the more I tried to fight this wealthy rascal the more punishment I would get. I thought he was about right, so when I came out of prison, Mike and I were married, and we went into keeping this place, as he had some money, and I didn't trouble my man at all. No doubt he thinks I am dead, but I ain't, and I've got the papers yet, too, and perhaps the day will come when I can have my vengeance on Jonathan Latchford!"

A simultaneous cry of surprise came from the lips of the orphans.

"The name—the name of the man who died in your house?" Katherine exclaimed, trembling with excitement.

"Gilbert Montcal," replied the woman, amazed at the interest betrayed by the two girls.

"He was our father! We are the orphans whom this vile man Latchford robbed!" Katherine cried.

The woman stared, hardly able to bring herself to believe that this could be true.

Then, with a violent kick, the door was burst open, and into the apartment strode one of the most noted of the New York detectives, followed by Latchford's secretary, the young man who had befriended the girls—Salem Kerretton.

"You are fairly treed this time, Betty," the detective remarked. "This is a pretty ugly scrape, and I reckon you will have to go up the river for a long while."

With cries of joy the orphans had rushed

toward the young man, and he briefly explained that, calling at the hotel next day he found the proprietor, who had taken a fancy to the girls, alarmed at their absence. Detectives were at once employed, and with such success that Abner Latchford and his confederates had been traced and captured, and the girls tracked from the time they had left the old house until they had entered Dublin Betty's den.

"Oh, no! No up the river for me, captain, if you please. Lord love you! I didn't mean no harm to these precious girls," the woman replied, with a grin of triumph, for she saw a way out of the difficulty.

"What!" cried Kerretton, astonished, when he heard the woman's voice. "Why, if it isn't Mrs. Martin!"

"Hallo! hallo! who knows me by my old name?" and then she recognized the speaker. "Why, it is little Salem Kerretton; but, how you have grown! This lad owes a deal to your father, young ladies, for he gave him money when his father died, and there wasn't a soul in the world to take care of him."

"And he has been anxiously waiting for a chance to pay the debt. Yes, ladies, that I might be able one day to serve you, I have remained with the man whom I know to be a rascal and whom I suspect of being a robber."

CHAPTER XIX.

JUSTICE AT LAST.

"AND so he is, and I can prove it! I've got the documents right in my bosom here to prove it!" the woman exclaimed, and from a secret inside pocket she produced two papers, yellow with age.

"There's the partnership agreement signed in my presence and witnessed by me, and here is the acknowledgment of the receipt of a thousand dollars paid into the firm by your father, young ladies—Gilbert Montcal. Take 'em, miss; you're the eldest, I reckon," she cried, giving the papers to Katherine. "Now sail in and strip this black-hearted scoundrel of every dollar he has got if you can, and I will just laugh at the fun! I'm ready to go on the witness-stand, and there's a man that knows about the partnership, although not much—Jabez Jones; he used to be a watchman at the factory."

"He is still in Latchford's employment, and now I understand why he has such influence over his master," the secretary remarked.

"Come, Mister Detective, I reckon these gals ain't got no complaint to make against me!" the woman exclaimed, with an air of triumph.

"Under the circumstances I should say they were very unreasonable young ladies if they had," the officer remarked, quick to understand that there had been wheels within wheels, and that from the nettle, danger, the orphans had plucked the flower, safety.

The rest of our tale is soon told.

Acting under the advice of Mr. Kerretton, who not only found counsel but the material sinews of war—money—able lawyers were retained and the case of the orphan sisters intrusted to

their hands. The millionaire was waited upon by one of these legal gentlemen, for as he expressed it, the case was so strong it was advisable to show their hand at once that the other side might understand a contest would be a useless waste of time and money.

Latchford, though, was too much the slave of the money which he had stolen to yield it without a struggle, but when he came to consult his own lawyers and they went into the particulars of the case, they strongly advised a compromise, for they frankly declared that Latchford had not one chance out of a thousand to win.

But, he would not listen to any such thing. What, give up the wealth for which he had put his soul in peril, at the first demand? It was not to be thought of! But, when he found that the men who had assumed the championship of the two orphans were not only disposed to hold him to a rigid accountability, but were also doing their best to accumulate proof so as to send Mr. Abner to State prison, he showed signs of weakening, and finally agreed to come to terms, provided Abner was allowed to go free.

One million dollars he agreed to pay, and Mr. Kerretton took care that, out of this money, the lawyers did not take a colossal sum for their services, as is generally the rule with "the profession." *Justice*, to them, means enormous fees.

Abner's case was arranged so that he was released on bail, which it was expected he would forfeit, for his father had determined to send him far away from all his old associates, hoping that in the new West he might learn to lead a different life; but, what is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh they say, and the young man had not been absent from New York a month when intelligence came that he had become involved in a drunken brawl in a gambling house at Kansas City, and in the affray had been so badly wounded that he had only lived for an hour after being hurt.

The last straw breaks the camel's back, and the death of his only child, the only one who had been spared to him out of a large family, threw the millionaire into a fever.

He took to his bed and never rose from it. In ten days from the time of the first attack he was dead, and all through his delirium he raved about the curse that was attached to the gold which he had so basely stolen from the widow and the orphans.

The orphan girls being Latchford's nearest kin, inherited all his estate, and thus fate repaired the wrong which had been done.

To the young secretary the girls were more than grateful; and when, encouraged by Katherine's smiles, he told his soft tale, he was a thriving wooer.

From Colorado, too, came Hermia's lover, and the sisters were wedded on the same night. Happiness at last had come to the two orphan girls.

THE END.

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